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Cross-cultural Ecotheology in the Poetry of Li-Young Lee

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

### Cross-cultural Ecotheology in the Poetry of Li-Young Lee

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This thesis explores the cross-cultural ecotheology of contemporary American poet Li-Young Lee by looking at the intersection of the human, the natural, and the sacred in his poetry. Close readings of Lee's poetic encounters with roses, persimmons, trees, wind, and light through the lens of Christianity and Daoism illustrate the way Lee is able to merge the Eastern concepts of interconnection and mutual harmony with Western ideas of sacredness and divinity. This discussion places Lee in direct conversation with modern and contemporary ecopoets who use the creative energy of language to express our moral and ethical responsibility to the world around us. Lee's poetry explores an innately sacred and transcendent relationship with the natural world that suggests that our understanding of our human identity is intricately tied to our respect and reverence for our natural environment.

Keywords: Li-Young Lee, ecopoetry, ecotheology, Christianity, Daoism, Daoist, nature, environment, metaphysics, roses, persimmons, trees, wind, light

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Despite Li-Young Lee's repeated attempts to resist categorization as an Asian American poet, much of the scholarship surrounding Lee has been devoted to the question of how he communicates his hybrid identity through his poetry. Scholars like Douglas Basford and Mary Slowik have emphasized the influence of Lee's Chinese immigrant experience on his poetry, while others, like Steven Yao, have questioned the authenticity of Lee's references to Chinese culture in order to highlight the difficulties of reading hybrid literatures. In an attempt to move beyond questions of race, scholars like Jeffery Partridge and Wenying Xu have begun to make space for Lee in an American poetic tradition by linking him to Emersonian transcendentalism and Whitman's conceptions of the body and soul. However, Lee, more concerned with poetry outside of race, explains, "When we hear law in poetry we're not hearing human law, we're hearing universal law" (Dearing and Graber 95). In another interview, he says, "We can't be poets witnessing the visible; we have to be poets witnessing the invisible" (Marshall 136). In order to fulfill this claim, Lee often writes metaphysical poems that seek to transcend materiality and explore the relationship between the human and the divine; however, Lee's metaphysics are always rooted in the physical world. This is perhaps because he inherits a unique blend of Eastern and Western religious education from his Chinese immigrant parents. He explains, "There was a strange mix, almost like Christianity through Daoism" (Cooper and Yu 59).

A Daoist reading of Lee, especially one focused on Lee's depiction of the natural world, must not, as Juliana Chang warns, do "violence to writing that absorbs and revives multiple histories and discourses" (94).<sup>1</sup> Instead, my purpose will be to emphasize Lee's multiple histories and reference frames showing how Daoism combines with Chinese culture, Christianity, and Western philosophy in shaping Lee's complex cross-cultural cosmology. Specifically, close readings of roses, persimmons, trees, wind, and light in Lee's poetry show how he uses Daoist

principles of interconnectedness and mutual harmony with Christian ideas of sacredness and divinity to ground his metaphysics firmly in the physical world. In doing so, Lee's ecotheology moves beyond questions of race, ethnicity, culture, or sectarianism towards a more universal worldview which privileges the sacred and transcendent aspects of humanity's relationship to the natural world.

Before considering how Daoism influences Lee's depiction of the natural world, let us first review crucial principles of Daoist ideology. The first principle is interconnectedness. In his essay on how Daoism sees human connection and responsibility to the environment, Eric Sean Nelson writes, "Nature and society are not divided into unconnected opposites, and their mutuality implies that harming one equally harms the other" (305). This concept, while not unique to Daoism, counters many modern perceptions, perhaps influenced by Christianity, that nature and human society are in conflict. That humans and nature are equal and that harming one harms the other suggests that both are interconnected parts of the same whole. Second, interconnectedness between humanity and nature is enhanced by addition of the sacred or divine as understood through the principle of mutual harmony. Chi-Tim Lai writes, "There is no doubt that the Chinese model of the order of nature is founded upon the image of organismic process in which parts of the entire universe interact and transform under the self-generating principles of *qi* and *yin* and *yang*" (97). *Qi*, *yin*, and *yang* are three essential parts of the mutual harmony best understood by looking back at Daoist creation mythology. In his manual on Daoism, Martin Palmer quotes chapter 42 of the Daodejing (Tao Te Ching):

The Tao gives birth to the One;

The One gives birth to the Two;

The Two give birth to the Three;

The Three give birth to all things. (3)

In this system, the Dao embodies ultimate harmony and unity and all creation comes from that unity. The One “gives birth to” *yin* and *yang*, opposing forces of nature that are in eternal struggle. They are contrary and yet “complementary and cooperative” to the end that “the existence of each is only possible in juxtaposition to the other” (Cooper 15). It is this continual conflict and oppositional balance between the two opposing yet coequal forces that “generates the energy (ch’i) which fuels the creation and which causes all to come to birth” (Palmer 5). *Ch’i*, also written as *qi*, is the life force or breath that embodies all living things. It is this energy created by the *yin* and *yang* that fuels the creation of the Three—“the triad of Heaven, Earth and Humanity—” and through which all living things are created (5). Mutual harmony then suggests a connection not only between humanity and earth but also between heaven and earth. The editors of *Daoism and Ecology* explain this connection another way by comparing it to the Christian concept of salvation: “The idea of ‘salvation’ that is suggested in the Daoist religion is fundamentally medicinal—that is, concerned with the ‘healing’ regeneration of the organic matrix of life” (xlix). Salvation comes from being aware of one’s self and one’s role in affecting the mutual harmony of all of the interconnected parts of the organic matrix of life.

One way of understanding interconnectedness and mutual harmony in Daoism is by looking at its influence on Chinese culture. As Lai implies by calling the Daoist model “the Chinese model,” Daoist philosophy cannot be separated from Chinese cultural history and belief (Paper 13). One way of viewing the symbiotic relationship of humans, nature, and the sacred is through the Chinese practice of filial piety. In his essay on Daoism and ecology, Jordan Paper explains:

As Chinese religion evolved, *xiao* (filial piety), the fundamental aspect of social relationships of the *rujia* tradition based on natural, nuclear-family ties, was stretched to the realm beyond humans. . . . Family not only included the state, it included the natural world, a realization undoubtedly arising from the ecstatic religious experience of union with the entire environment. (14)

Thus, Chinese religion extends the filial respect and religious worship of one's elders and ancestors to include respect and worship for the natural world. This belief simultaneously grows out of "the ecstatic religious experience of union" with nature and promotes that experience through increased reverence and humility toward nature. Accordingly, humankind's ability to access sacred religious experience and achieve "salvation" through mutual harmony requires a dutiful and purposeful relationship of love for and trust of nature.

In the end, the physical world, according to Daoism and Chinese cultural philosophy, does not oppose but is a necessary link to the metaphysical or transcendent experience. Lai further explains, going back to the concept of harmony, "An important component of the close relation between humans and nature is spiritual and ethical. Human beings are responsible for causing either deterioration or harmonization of the organismic processes of nature, Heaven, and Earth" (108). This responsibility is sobering and highly relevant when read in connection with numerous contemporary reports on the increasing degradation of our environment. Daoist philosophy would suggest that deforestation, rising ocean levels, and decreased access to clean water and air are not only physical problems, but spiritual ones as well. While many contemporary ecowriters are extremely conversant in what Jonathan Bate calls the ecopolitical, they may be less aware of the nuances of ecopoetics or ecotheology. While those writers focused on direct political action (the ecopolitical) are not at odds with those focused on a more personal



or transcendent relationship with nature (the ecopoetic or ecotheological), they often differ greatly in purpose and language (42). This difference is important in reference to a poet like Lee who is not consciously ecopolitical, but whose work has moral and political implications because of its ecotheology of interconnection.

While Daoist principles of interconnectedness and mutual harmony are present in Lee, Lee is not simply a Daoist poet. Lee's poetic influences are a complex tapestry of Eastern and Western religious and philosophical viewpoints blended to create his unique cosmology. However, Daoism has given Lee both the language and the distance to look beyond ethnocentrism to get at more universal questions of human identity vis á vis our moral and spiritual responsibility to the world around us. Lee, born in Indonesia to Chinese parents, experienced a unique religious education. Upon arriving in the United States, Lee's father attended Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, became a Christian minister, and instructed his children in both the King James Bible and Chinese philosophy and literature (Xiaoqing 115). In an interview in which Lee was asked what part his Chinese heritage plays in his adult life, he commented, in addition to speaking Chinese with his family members, "I've practiced a Taoist [Daoist] alchemy most of my life. I was involved in a small meditation and Taoist [Daoist] school" (Kirkpatrick 103). Therefore, the symbiotic and filial relationship between man and nature in Lee's poetry is likely not coincidence, but rather a product of Lee's own Daoist education and desire to express his spirituality through the natural world.

An example of this interconnected filial relationship between humans and the earth occurs in Lee's longer poem "Always a Rose" from his first collection, *Rose*. In the poem, Lee weaves together the human cycle of life and death with that of the rose, emphasizing its role not merely as metaphor but as a tangible part of the speaker's life and physical reminder of his

eventual death. Furthermore, the speaker's filial and sacred respect creates an intimacy between the two, much like the intimacy between the speaker and his own family, particularly between the speaker and his dead father. Finally, the father/son relationship in the poem becomes not just about the speaker and his own father but also about a Christian Father and Son and the overarching issue of man's relationship to the divine.

In the first section of the poem, the speaker describes how each member of his family would handle a rose that had been left for dead in a pile of leaves. This catalog of responses highlights different ways of viewing the natural world, "Of my brothers / one would have ignored it, / another ravished it, the third / would have pinned it to his chest and swaggered home" (*Rose* 37). There are those who ignore the natural world, there are those who violate it for their own pleasure, and there are those who only see it as an accessory to be used at their casual convenience. The narrator continues:

my mother would bow before it, then bear it  
to my father's grave, where  
he would grant it seven days,  
then return and claim it forever. (22-25)

The speaker's mother shows her sensitivity to the interconnectedness between human and nonhuman life by bowing to show reverence for the dying rose. Her filial respect toward the rose acknowledges a spiritual relationship between herself and the natural world similar to the relationship between her and her ancestors. In contrast to the mother's silent humility toward the rose, the speaker's dead father exerts dominion over it and grants it seven days before returning and claiming it forever. The father seems to reflect not an Eastern or Daoist concept of humankind's relationship to nature but a more Western or Christian concept. The seven days he

grants the rose echo the Biblical seven days in which God created the physical world and the seven seals in the book of Revelation that precede the Day of Judgment. One represents creation and the other represents the movement toward destruction, judgment, and eventual resurrection and recreation. The father in the poem seems to function like the Father/Son God in Christianity who creates the world and then reclaims the world through death and atonement in order to exalt it in an eternal afterlife. The speaker of the poem is presented as caught among the responses and traditions he describes, and while seemingly dismissing the responses of his unwise brothers, he is forced to engage and reconcile the differing traditions of his parents—in one a humility and mutual reverence and in the other a more commanding or controlling hierarchy. Unsure, the speaker of the poem continues, “I took it / put it in water, / and set it on my windowsill” (26-28). He gives the dying rose water and sunlight in order to prolong its life. Consciously, the speaker is left contemplating the lone rose on the windowsill and is perhaps unconsciously left wondering about the appropriate way to engage the natural world. Lee carefully weaves them together—not reconciling them, but placing them in useful conversation and seeking wisdom through his perception of their similarities and differences.

The filial and spiritual connections with the rose continue as it becomes an intermediary between the family and the divine. In section two of the poem, the rose emblemizes the speaker’s soul, his dying father, his grandmother and her childhood, his brother’s mental illness, the *Book of Martyrs*, his mother’s healing powers, and finally his intimate relationship with his wife:

You live, you die with me, in spite  
of me, like my sleeping wife.

Lying here, with her at my right and you at my left,

the dying lies between the dying. (67-70)

The rose is not a symbol for his wife but an entity lying next to both of them—a kind of third member of their intimate relationship. The rose is like his sleeping wife in that it reminds him of what is most important, most beautiful, most sacred, and ultimately, most fleeting as all three move toward inevitable death. His wife will wake, and that intimate feeling of lying next to her will be lost to a new flood of emotions. The rose will die, and its specific and momentary beauty will be lost. The short life cycle of the rose reminds the speaker of his own life cycle, but also of the role that the rose plays in his life cycle. His trajectory toward knowledge and wisdom is forever changed because of his encounter with the dying rose and the way it causes him to reconsider his intimate relationships.

This intimacy between husband/wife and speaker/rose illustrates the Daoist sensibilities of human/nature interconnection—and the necessity of seeing such interconnection as sacred. The intimacy between the speaker and the rose in the poem suggests a mutually influential relationship where harming one entity harms the other. The speaker gives the dying rose water and sunlight, and his interaction with the rose teaches him about his own mortality. Ultimately, the two must be in harmony to experience the saving (as in religious salvation) experience of the metaphysical through the physical. In his own study of the merging of Eastern and Western philosophical and spiritual traditions concerning the natural world, David Abram references philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty to make the following observation: “Our most immediate experience of things [. . .] is necessarily an experience of reciprocal encounter—of tension, communication, and commingling” (56). The speaker’s experience with the rose is that of reciprocal encounter. It forces him to reflect on death, and it communicates to him the necessity of appreciating its fleeting beauty and the fleeting beauty of his sleeping wife. The “tension,

communication, and commingling” of their own intimate relationship lying beside each other reminds him of the shortness of life as they move toward their own eventual deaths.

As the poem continues, the speaker’s encounters with the rose, particularly his eating of the rose, provide a window into the transcendent by attaching it to his sense of identity. By combining the body of the rose with his own body through eating it, the speaker comes to know himself not just in relation to other individuals, but in relation to the natural world. At three points in the poem the rose is ingested. In section two, his grandmother describes eating “Black Chinese roses” that “tasted like grapes” (35, 37). In section three, the speaker is made to eat the rose as a remedy for being born “half-girl” (92). And in section four, the speaker describes the eating of the rose as a type of Christian communion (112). This emphasis on eating, a common theme in Lee’s work, illustrates a connection between the transcendent and the material that critic Wenying Xu reads as linking Lee to Daoism. Xu explains that the Dao or *the way* of correct action and purpose in Daoism shows how “people are to live with creative quietude in the situations where they find themselves” (114). Like the individuals in Lee’s poems, followers of Daoism are able to access the transcendent through firm connections to their physical surroundings. In “Always a Rose,” the speaker eats the rose not only for physical nourishment but for medicinal and symbolic reasons. By ingesting a part of nature, he deepens his sensory and physical interaction and makes the rose not just a reflection of his life but an actual part of it. Seen from the perspective of phenomenology, eating the rose increases his sensory interaction or interdependence with the rose, illustrating what Abrams calls “participation.” Here, Abrams describes perception, “at its most intimate level, the experience of an active interplay, or coupling, between the perceiving body and that which it perceives” (57). In the poem, the

speaker participates with the rose by ingesting its “body” (112). In the final instance of eating the rose:

Odorous and tender flower-  
 body, I eat you  
 to recall my first misfortune.  
 Little, bitter  
 body, I eat you  
 to understand my grave father. (111-16)

The rose becomes “body” which emphasizes the active interplay between the three bodies in the poem—the body of the rose, the body of the speaker, and the body of the dead father. These three bodies reflect the Christian practice of symbolically, even literally, eating the body of Christ during communion. As communion links the Christian individual to his spiritual and physical Savior, the rose, an established symbol of life, death, and interconnection, links the living son to his father. This ceremonial act allows the poet son to better understand his father’s seriousness and solemnity in life. The physicality of this act does not detract from its spirituality but enhances and is even necessary to it—much like the relationship between the physical and spiritual in Daoism.

Through the three descriptions of eating the rose, Lee connects medicinal views of eating the rose with Christian ideas of eating the body of Christ—often symbolized by a rose. The symbolism of the rose, which is never mentioned in the Hebrew Bible or New Testament, probably developed out of Greco-Roman culture. In ancient Rome, the flower symbolized Aphrodite/Venus—therefore representing beauty and love; however, it also pointed to the fleeting nature of life as marked by *Rosalia*, an ancient festival set apart for remembering the

dead. Connections between Christ and the rose were developed by Christian artists of the Middle Ages who used ornate stained glass rose windows to link both Christ and Mary with the rose. Relying on its history as a symbol of romantic love, early Christians transformed the rose into a representation of divine love between the virgin mother and the Christ child and love of Christ for his true followers (Koehler). Relying on this religious symbolism, Lee uses the rose as a symbol of life and death and love and devotion. The rose first connects him to what is painful to recall, “my first misfortune,” “my grave father,” “grief.” But finally those difficulties have grounded him and informed his understanding of himself: “I / eat you to sink into / my own body” (121-23). The rose is love, Christ, death, life, his father, nature, tradition, sacredness and finally, himself. The body of the rose becomes part of his body just as later in the poem the rose is itself nourished by “dead roses” (212). Their ultimate intermingling has shown the speaker that he cannot understand himself outside his understanding of the rose. His relationship to nature is his relationship to self.

A Christian reading of this section does not discount its Daoist elements but reflects Lee’s own admission that he learned “Christianity through Daoism.” His view of the sacredness of using the body of the rose to simultaneously reference the body of Christ and his own body reflects the ultimate harmony among man, nature, and divinity that Daoism advocates. In this moment of communion or togetherness, this intimate encounter among “bodies,” the natural and human worlds do not simply mirror each other but sustain each other. The rose allows the speaker to reflect on his father’s death not primarily as misfortune but as a natural part of the life cycle. Read through a variety of cultural symbols and lenses, the poet’s experience shows him what it means to be human—in addition to and through being Daoist, Christian, Chinese, and American.

This communion of bodies ends section four of the poem and section five begins, “Listen now to something human” (127). It as if Lee is conscious of the way the human and the natural have been so interconnected that our notion of “what is human” is completely changed. “What is human” is no longer separate from what is natural or what is divine. Tellingly, his description of what is human is what is intimate: “a kiss, or a tear, a pass of the hand along a loved one’s face” (129). These intimate encounters define humanity, but they are not limited to humanity. His intimacy with the rose has shown him what it means to be human—compassionate, aware, and loving. The poem continues with the speaker distributing roses to those whom he loves, the rose acting as intermediary—particularly to those who are “lost.” The section ends with the intermingling of what is sacred, filial, and natural: “For him a rose, my lover of roses and of God, / who taught me to love the rose, and fed me roses” and “My father the Godly [. . .] / My father rose, my father thorn” (*Rose* 154-55, 165). In trying to separate what is human from “nature,” Lee concludes that it is not possible; the “human,” the “natural,” and the “divine” are too interconnected and interdependent to be separated.

While the rose gets the most expansive treatment in “Always a Rose,” it is a recurring and important symbol in much of Lee’s work. In “Arise, Go Down” the rose functions along side the wasp as a point of interconnection in the continual struggle for mutual harmony between competing elements. The poem explores Daoist notions of *yin* and *yang* by looking at the way the world—including nature, God, and humanity—continually contradicts itself:

it’s a wasp perched on my left cheek. I keep  
 my eyes closed and stand perfectly still  
 in the garden till it leaves me alone,



not to contemplate how this century  
ends and the next begins with no one

I know having seen God, but to wonder (*City* 37)

Lee's metaphysical perception of his father's garden is not sparked by an actual encounter with God but with one of God's creations—the wasp. The wasp forces the speaker of the poem to stand perfectly still and ponder not on the grandiose but on the quotidian: “why I get through most days unscathed” (10). The speaker, not having ever seen God or knowing anyone who has, is left to understand God through nature. The poem questions the paradox of God by considering how various elements struggle against each other. The speaker remarks:

I've become a scholar of cancellations.

Here, I stand among my father's roses

and see that what punctures outnumbered what

consoles, the cruel and tender never

make peace, though one climbs, though one descends (17-21)

This speaker is again using the rose to question the difficulties of living in a world of unending opposition—where life and death, pleasure and pain, tenderness and cruelty are always simultaneously existing and never “mak[ing] peace.” The speaker wonders about the role of God in this conflict. While the roses “announce on earth the kingdom / of gravity. A bird cancels it” (25-26). The roses announce not the kingdom of God but the kingdom of the earth—physical laws, gravity, while the bird counteracts that gravity—nature counteracting nature. Perhaps unsure of how a Western idea of “God” fits into this natural interaction, the poem sees a more inclusive divinity present in the sacred life energy or *qi* produced by the *yin* and *yang* working in

continual opposition. In a Daoist reading of the poem, the opposing forces while contrary are necessary parts of the same whole. Neither side can exist without the other. Thus, the miracle of the bird's flight is only possible because of the existence of gravity and that which climbs is only measured by that which descends. They need each other. Finally, the speaker knows what is tender because he has experienced what is cruel. The poem ends by juxtaposing "a family waiting in terror / before they're rended" with a man who

might arise, go down, and walk along a path

And pause and bow to roses, roses

his father raised, and admire them, for one moment

unable, thank God, to see in each and

every flower the world canceling itself. (39-43)

The cruelty of the world is that families are torn apart as roses continue to bloom. For the speaker, the final harmony of the poem is not a reconciliation of the two disparate scenes but a realization of their opposition. Again, Lee's cross-cultural thinking about God and humankind has allowed him to resist definitions which place humans and nature in opposition and create an ecotheology which embraces a world where nature is not just a harmonious backdrop to life, but an interconnected web of opposition and energy. Nature is the man and the wasp, gravity and the bird, the thorn of the rose and the beauty of the rose. The speaker, finally, bows to reverence the rose because of the way it simultaneously puts his existence in perspective and allows him to escape that perspective—as he is stuck in a "moment / unable, thank God, to see." In this momentary blindness, the poem pauses on the speaker's father admiring the roses in his garden. Lee shows the way the flower is able to both draw attention to and distract from the all-

encompassing universal organizing principles of *yin* and *yang*. In that moment, the beauty of the rose distracts the speaker from the cruelty of the world, and he is able to reflect on its good before being pulled back into the complexities and intricacies of nature and life.

While the rose is definitely a recurring symbol of the natural world for Lee, it is not the only one. In one of Lee's most frequently anthologized poems, "Persimmons," the "soft and brown-spotted" fruit serves as a physical symbol connecting him to his Chinese heritage. Steven Yao has complicated this interpretation by showing the way the Chinese elements in the poem have been exoticized in the name of American assimilation (11). Yao argues that the wordplay Lee uses between "sun" and "son" in the seventh stanza "further naturalized the persimmon as a positive emblem of family relation and cultural identity rather than merely as either a marker of ethnic difference or an exotic, strange fruit" (15). Like the rose, the persimmons serve as mediators between the speaker and his cultural and filial past. The persimmon tree, a plant native to China, but exported throughout the world, produces a brightly-colored, delicate fruit which ripens after it has been picked—often in a cool place and wrapped in paper as Lee describes in the poem. Eaten too early, the persimmon tastes bitter, but given time to ripen, it develops a sweet and distinct flavor. In the final stanza, the speaker's father remembers a painting he painted of the persimmons:

*Some things never leave a person:  
scent of the hair of one you love,  
the texture of persimmons,  
in your palm, the ripe weight. (Rose 19)*

The persimmons remind the speaker's father of those things that are most intimate and most memorable. Lee, often described as a poet of memory, uses this unique fruit as a physical vehicle

for the father's memories of China and for the speaker's own memories of his father. The intimacy and love between the father and son, their sacred, filial connection, can only be expressed through the sensory smell, weight, and sweetness of a perfectly ripe persimmon. Like the persimmon ripening off the tree, the son's love and understanding of his father have ripened over time. The weight of the fruit grounds his memories and makes them sweet even after his father is physically gone. The physical world is a necessary part of their intimate relationship.

Wenyng Xu describes the metaphysical transcendence in the poem this way:

The symbol of persimmons vividly sets the contrast between culture, ignorant of its ripe connotations, that punishes a child for mispronouncing words and the immigrant home where love cancels fear and pain. Persimmons thus figure for the rich, full warmth of his parents' love, which he finds lacking in American culture. And love and tenderness are the spirit of Lee's songs that bring him closer to God of the universal mind. (117)

The persimmons, envoys of the natural world, serve as counterpoints to a discriminating society and remind the poet of the love and intimacy he experienced in his parents' home. The intimate relationship between the individual and family and between the individual and nature provide a "spirit" that brings Lee "closer to God." And while Xu argues that the persimmons ground Lee's metaphysics by linking him to his cultural and ethnic roots, the persimmons also ground his metaphysics by linking him to the earth and the intimate interconnection of all of its parts.

In Lee's third collection, *Book of My Nights*, he continues to find transcendence through Daoist interconnection and mutual harmony. In the poem "Degrees of Blue," a boy's visceral experience while reading grounds him to his environment—allowing him to mature in wisdom and understanding while remaining intimately connected to the physical earth. The poem

describes the experience of a young boy looking up from his book to find that day has turned to night. In the haze between light and dark and imagination and reality, his internal and external worlds begin to meld. Lee illustrates this by mirroring the story the boy is reading with his own circumstances. In the story, “the dreamer” wakes “to find the rowers gone” whereas in the poem, the reader “wakes” by looking up from his book to find his parents gone. This mirroring blurs the boundaries between imagination and reality, inside the boy’s head and outside, which then paves the way for Lee to blur the boundaries between the inside of the house, symbolizing society and humanity, and the outside, nature and environment. The boy looks up from his page to see “leaves at the window” which “have been traveling beside his silent reading / as long as he can remember” (*Nights* 30). The boy wonders about his absent parents and questions:

How is he going to explain the branches  
beginning to grow from his ribs and throat,  
the cries and trills starting in his own mouth? (22-24)

The outer world has invaded the inner. The boy and the tree have become inseparable. The physical tree growing up through the boy symbolizes the boy’s growing understanding of himself and the connection between his mind, body, and soul. Xu reads this poem as an expression of a problematic “American sublime,” problematic because, “the American poetic expression of the sublime is a performance of a distinctively American subject substantiated through the subjugation of land and its first peoples” (112). Xu makes allowance for Lee by conceding that “although Lee does not participate in the representation of such an American material sublime, he is nevertheless part of this American poetic tradition in which wild immensity, be it nature, force, or rhetoric, predictably accompanies self-deification and hyperbolic imagination” (112). In Xu’s reading of the poem, Lee’s self-deification occurs by his

cataloging the moon, the sea, and the planet and “center[ing] himself as the knower and seer” (113). However, what Xu reads as self-deification could actually be, read in context of Lee’s other natural imagery, deification of the innately sacred connection between the self and the earth. Lee’s position as “knower and seer” is only possible through his humility and reverence toward the complex living and changing energy of the earth. Thus, while Lee has clearly been influenced by American transcendentalism and its problematic “American sublime,”<sup>2</sup> his cross-cultural ecotheology, particularly Christianity through Daoism, allows him to use nature without abusing it. Through Daoism, Lee avoids the hierarchical language of superiority which previous generations had used as justification for the ruling over and subjugating that which was “less-civilized” or “more natural.” While Xu mentions Lee’s metaphysical Daoist influence, she fails to see how that Daoist influence makes all the difference in giving Lee a language to talk about human identity in relation to nature and the divine (114).

Lee further explores these relationships by complicating the connection between the physical and the spiritual—particularly through his notions of body and soul. The tree in the poem grows up through “ribs and throat, / the cries and trills starting in his own mouth” (22-23). The “ribs and throat” are the physical markers of the body, while the “cries and trills” are more ephemeral markers of the spirit or soul. The body of the boy is made up of both his flesh and bones and the air that moves through that flesh and bones to create sounds of grief or pain. The poem ends with “the planet / knowing itself at last” (27-28). The boy’s maturation is described through Daoist language of coming to know oneself in relation to one’s environment. The planet is not an anthropomorphized symbol but a humble assertion that this physical earth is a necessary part of one’s spiritual quest for enlightenment. This belief underlies an ancient Chinese tradition of seeking for immortality through meditation and alchemy (Palmer 91). By linking himself to

the tree, the boy's body becomes connected to the earth and transformed into a symbol of longevity and spirituality. As some of the oldest living things on earth, trees represent a process of continually growing up toward the cosmos—connecting the *yin* and *yang* of heaven and earth. The boy becomes like the tree, a living, growing part of the organic matrix of life.

Up to this point, close readings of the rose, the persimmon, and the tree in Lee's poetry provides a way of illustrating Lee's metaphysical Christianity through Daoism. By mixing Daoist ideas of interconnection and mutual harmony with Christian ideas of God and sacredness, Lee's poems reconcile often competing notions of materiality and spirituality. Lee's intimacy with the rose, reverence for the persimmon, and union with the tree all demonstrate the continual link between the individual, the natural, and the sacred. While Lee's specific poetics are unique, these overarching questions of interconnection link him to a much larger literary and philosophical conversation about the responsibility humans have to their environment. While the theoretical language of ecocriticism is fairly young, writers have obviously been writing about the natural world forever. In an effort to seek greater clarity and truth, modern and contemporary scholars of ecopoetry have tried to separate the genre from other traditions by looking at what distinguishes it. For example, in his article on modern ecopoetry's relationship to Emersonian transcendentalism, Roger Thompson explains, "The difference between rhetoric and poetics of nineteenth-century environmental writing and twentieth-century ecopoetry highlights the shift from conceptions of nature as divine metaphor to nature as location of social responsibility and action" (37). While Thompson's distinction may hold true for many ecopoetic writers, he imposes a view that ecopoetry must contain some kind of ecopolitics or call to action. In contrast, Jonathan Bate's definition of ecopoetry contends with that assumption by making a distinction between the ecopolitical and the ecopoetic:

Updating the terminology, we might say that the Rousseauistic motions of reverie, of solitude and of walking are conducive to what I shall call ‘ecopoetic’ consciousness but not necessarily to ‘ecopolitical’ commitment. They are motions which may lead to environmentalism [. . .] but their connection with radical ecology’s project of wholesale social transformation is more abstruse. (42)

Highlighting this discrepancy between the two definitions is not to suggest that one is right and the other is wrong, but rather that ecopoetics is a diverse and dynamic genre.

While Li-Young Lee may not fit into Thompson’s ecopoetics of social action, he clearly fits into Bate’s ecopoetics of reverie. However, even Bate admits his two categories are more often than not “complex intersections and contradictions” (42). In fact, it is perhaps those intersections and contradictions which make ecopoetry such an interesting field of study. As science and technology evolve, so does our understanding of our environment and our relationship to it. Whether consciously or not, contemporary poets and philosophers are responding to these changes in order to give us the language to talk about this changing relationship. While the language may not be new (it can be as old as Daoism) its context is new as is our perspective.<sup>3</sup> With these complexities in mind, Lee’s poetry, while far from the ecopolitical, is part of the ecopoetic goal of advancing a new way to think about our relationship to the earth; however, central to Lee’s ecopoetics is his metaphysics. His emphasis on the sacred links him to a relatively new and less commonly discussed genre of ecotheology. Ultimately, in drawing from American transcendentalism, Chinese Daoism, and Western Christianity, Lee’s poetry creates a unique ecotheology where nature is not just divine metaphor, but actually divine. Lee’s intimate encounters with flowers, trees, and fruit are not didactic calls to action but rather humble realizations about our interconnectedness and therefore mutual



responsibility. In Scott Slovic's collection of essays on ecocriticism, *Going Away to Think*, he worries that in all the time and energy that we expend in saving the planet, we have forgotten to savor it (3). Perhaps Lee's cross-cultural ecotheology bridges these two impulses. By savoring the transcendent experience of the natural world, Lee highlights the importance of saving it as well. In other words, the salvation that Lee advocates is one where both humanity and nature work to save each other by ensuring their mutual harmony and therefore survival.

This Daoist notion of salvation through ensuring the harmony of the organic matrix of life resonates with many contemporary biological and philosophical understandings of ecology. In his introduction to *The Ecological Thought*, Timothy Morton writes, "Ecology includes all the ways we imagine how we live together. Ecology is profoundly about coexistence. Existence is always coexistence" (4). Coexistence for Morton is a complex web of relationships like the careful balance in Daoist thought. David Abrams describes the organic matrix from another perspective:

It is indeed, nothing other than the biosphere—the matrix of earthly life in which we ourselves are embedded. Yet this is not the biosphere as it is conceived by an abstract and objectifying science, no that complex assemblage of planetary mechanisms presumably being mapped and measured by our remote-sensing satellites; it is, rather, the biosphere as it is experienced and *lived from within* by the intelligent body—by the attentive human animal who is entirely part of the world that he, or she, experiences. (65)

As "attentive human animals" we are wired to be aware of our surroundings despite modern sensory overload which might deaden those senses. Our awareness comes not by scientific measuring but through innate perception.

This innate perception then informs our aesthetic and moral judgments. In fact, Jonathan Bate even makes this experience of being in the world an essential part of his definition of modern ecopoetry: “Ecopoetry is not a description of dwelling with the earth, not a disengaged thinking about it, but an experiencing of it. By ‘poetry’ here I mean *poiesis*, *making*, the medium of which may as well be, say, painting as writing” (42). The act of creation becomes a part of our experiencing the earth. In creating poetry, the poet is not standing back to describe his interactions but actually interacting. Perhaps, then, one way of insuring the mutual harmony of the vital energies is to use one’s creativity to express that relationship. In David Gilcrest’s introduction to *Greening the Lyre*, he writes that our understanding of our interdependence with nature “is a knowledge that deserves allegiance and affords, as [Gary] Snyder sees it, not just a relatively neutral ontology of ‘interconnectedness and reciprocity’ but rather an ontology of ‘joyful interpenetration’ worth celebrating in a poem” (31). In the act of creating poetry, writers like Snyder and Lee are able to simultaneously express, experience, and celebrate the joy of being an intimate part of the interconnected web of nature.

This understanding of the power of poetry to influence the organic matrix of life becomes clearer when read in connection with Lee’s own idea about the materiality of language. In an interview with Dianne Bilyak, when asked to elaborate on his declaration that he “writes from the soul,” Lee responded, “The soul and the body are the same thing. It just depends on how you cock your head. It’s the body in its conscious state. Our bodies are three billion cells a minute dying and being reborn. We’re changing, we’re kind of fountaining, there’s no materiality to apparent materiality. A physicist will tell you a table is 99.99% space” (604). What we perceive as a solid table is, when viewed from a particle level, really just space, and so what we perceive as our bodies is also really just space and perhaps soul. It is the combination of body and soul

that makes up our consciousness, and neither is complete without the other. In the same interview, Lee adds to this discussion of “apparent materiality” by showing how it connects to language: “There’s this Taoist [Daoist] tradition that the world was conceived out of a syllable. . . . [T]here was an S-U sound, that's the seed, and out of that sound things got more and more differentiated, and everything came into being. So it seems to me that my intuition as a child, that everything was speech, was pretty accurate” (606-07). In Lee’s retelling of this theory of creation, which may actually be more Buddhist than Daoist, the “S-U sound” is the seed that creates the world; all materiality comes from a single sound. This suggests that sound is actually material. Spoken language, like our souls, seems to be ephemeral space we cannot see or feel, yet it is actually physical vibrations. The very physicality of it allows it be spoken or heard. Similarly, even written language gains meaning through its physical presence on the page. Poetry, then, is not merely a mental or spiritual endeavor but a physical force. As a physical thing, poetry has the power to change or affect its surroundings; however, by the same logic, the physicality of poetry does not limit it to the material world but allows it to transcend the material world and become a link to a more ephemeral world of spirituality.

This conflating of the spiritual and the physical is especially evident in a poem from Lee’s latest collection, *Behind My Eyes*. In “Changing Places in the Fire,” the speaker of the poem approaches a liminal space between life and death through the natural world. The speaker presents several seeming opposites that exist in mutual harmony just as is suggested in the *yin* and *yang* of Daoist thought. In the second stanza, “the man who can’t sleep / and the man who can’t wake up / are the same man” (69). This seeming paradox suggests the liminal anxiety in the poem—life and death or awareness and unawareness are held up as stages of the same life. We cannot know sleep unless we know what it is to be awake. In order to understand these opposing

forces, Lee looks to the way death and memory function in the natural world to give insight into the way they function in the human. Timothy Morton deals with this relationship as well when he advocates “thinking big” as a way of getting beyond “nature” or “environmentalism” to an ecological thought which includes everything—a web of interconnection that he calls the “mesh.” He explains, “All life forms are the mesh, and so are all dead ones, as are their habitats, which are also made up of living and nonliving beings” (29). Everything in Morton’s ecological mesh is connected—living and dead. Morton continues, “Strangely, thinking big doesn’t mean that we put everything into a big box. Thinking big means that the box melts into nothing in our hands” (31). “Thinking big” allows us to break down categories between what is human and nonhuman and what is living and what is dead. A big view forces us to see infinite similarities and interconnections. So when Lee wonders at the wind telling “the oldest stories of Death,” perhaps he is not simply projecting an anthropomorphic concern for death on nature but recognizing the fundamental role of death in nature (*Behind* 16).

Memory in this poem, as in many of Lee’s other poems, serves as a connecting element. Memory, like the wind, moves through the trees, past the man, through the living and dead as a way of connecting the disparate and providing an expanded view of the mesh that includes past, present, and future. Memory and the wind equal that which is always both present and absent. The poem begins, “The wind in the trees / arrives all night at a word” (1-2). Like the word, the wind is a physical manifestation only experienced through other physical objects—like the leaves on the tree moving or the vibrations of language in our ears. In Daoism, the wind is sometimes described as the *qi* or vital energy of the whole earth. The wind, language, and memory all connect that which is ephemeral with that which is physical, ultimately causing the speaker of the poem to think big and wonder about his role “in a dream”:

with infinite moving parts  
 hems, pleats, train cars, recurring stairs,  
 an imperfect past, a rumored present,  
 figures multiplied inside a mirror.” (40-44)

This reading of Lee through Morton suggests that the mesh includes the past, the present, and the infinite future multiplied in a mirror—each moving part connected to each other and producing an intricate living and therefore always changing web of interconnectivity.

And while the speaker of the poem wonders about God, the transcendent in the poem is not a definition of a single deity but a realization of an overwhelming process of life and death that encompasses all things. The transcendence consists in the humility and perspective the speaker gains when he realizes that the spiritual and physical, like the wind in the trees, are modes of the same, interdependent existence—necessary and interconnecting parts of a larger experience. Finally, the poem concludes:

It isn't until he begins to wish  
 to sing  
 the whole flower  
 of his breathing, does he recognize  
 himself, a blossom mortally wounded on its stem. (45-49)

Finally, the speaker's life and anxiety about death is “the *whole* flower of his breathing” (emphasis added). His new perspective is a vision of wholeness that includes all interconnected parts—blossom and stem, mortally wounded—yet still breathing. Like the dying rose of Lee's earlier poem, the blossom is uprooted and moving toward death, but because of the ability of the poem to “think big,” its death is not an end but part of a larger and finally whole experience. The

blossom will continue “to live” in the memories of those who experienced it and in the way it will decompose in the dirt and provide nutrients for new forms of life.

The poem “To Hold” from Lee’s latest collection doesn’t mention roses or trees or wind but introduces a new metaphor to describe the same process—light. Lee uses light to describe the way our most intimate and sacred moments are simultaneously of this world and of another more transcendent world. The poem begins, “So we’re dust. In the meantime, my wife and I / make the bed” (*Behind* 98). We are physical beings. We came from nature, and we will return to nature. But that physicality does not limit our experience; it enhances it because it *is* our experience. The poem ends:

So often, fear has led me  
to abandon what I know I must relinquish  
in time. But for the moment,  
I’ll listen to her dream,  
and she to mine, our mutual hearing calling  
more and more detail into the light  
of a joint and fragile keeping. (12-18)

Despite our worries and fear about the past or the present, the perfect moment of simultaneously making the bed and listening to a dream show the delicate weaving together of the tangible and intangible aspects of our lives—the tangibility of the bed and the slowly disappearing memory of an intangible dream. It isn’t coincidental that light serves as the symbol for the merging of the two in that moment. Light is like language, a physical presence of waves and particles that we cannot hold on to. This very quality is perhaps why light is so often associated with spiritual manifestations; it is simultaneously of this world and otherworldly. The mutuality and intimacy

of the husband and wife in the poem recalls the mutuality and intimacy of humans and nature described in Daoism and illustrated in Lee.

Whether placing a dying rose in a vase, holding still in the garden to avoid a wasp, or eating a perfectly ripe persimmon, Lee's poetry illustrates the intimacy of humanity's relationship to the natural world. Whether thinking his own impending death, the death of his father, or the place of God in a tragedy, Lee constantly returns to the physical world as a place of ultimate sorrow and ultimate joy. Even when trying to talk about the ephemeral qualities of language or one's soul, Lee uses the physicality of the wind to show that physicality and spirituality are just two ways of describing the same thing. In trying to write about "universal law" outside of human politics or human law, Lee uses Daoist ecology that asserts that there is no "human" apart from "nature" because the two are both part of a universal whole (Dearing and Graber 95). It is Lee's unique Christianity through Daoism that gives him the language and perspective to step back and "think big," to see the way humanity, nature, and the divine intersect in a variety of interesting and powerful ways.

## Notes

1. See also Zhou Xiaojing's critique which argues that "Ethnocentric readings of Lee's poems by Stern, Wang, and Zhao are not only misleading, but also reductive of the rich cross-cultural sources of influence on Lee's work and of the creative experiment in his poetry. Their readings presuppose a misconception that a pure and fixed Chinese culture has been inherited and maintained by Chinese immigrants and their descendants in America" (114).

2. See both Wenying Xu and Jeffrey F. L. Partridge's articles on Lee which firmly establish a connection between Emerson and Lee.

3. See David Gilcrest's article "Regarding Silence: Cross-cultural Roots of Ecopoetic Meditation" for more information on the Daoist roots of ecopoetry.



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