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## SUSTAINING THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY?

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## **SPECIAL FEATURE**

### **Sustaining the Eighteenth Century**

## SPECIAL FEATURE INTRODUCTION

# SUSTAINING THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY?

Samara Anne Cahill

Most of the essays included in this special feature on sustainability in the eighteenth century originated as conference papers delivered at the Sustainable Networks: The Enlightenment to the Contemporary Conference held at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore in the summer of 2014. In several ways this was an important year for considering sustainability not just in terms of the environment but also in terms of historical institutions and disciplines. Singapore's fiftieth anniversary was on the horizon, the question of Scottish independence loomed even nearer, and, within the year, Singapore's founding prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, would pass away. Yew's death prompted a week of mourning—during which time a steady stream of 450,000 residents lined the streets to pay their respects—that culminated in a state funeral attended

by foreign dignitaries from all over the world in communal recognition that an era had ended, though a complex legacy remained.<sup>1</sup> It was a sobering time of reflection.

Singapore's success has been tumultuous: occupation by the Japanese army in World War II led to the withdrawal of the British colonial presence followed by Singapore being forced into independence by the federation of Malaysia in 1965—Lee famously cried on TV in response to the ejection. Yet Singapore endured these trials to become today's juggernaut of international finance and trade. The city-state will now encounter a brave new era of negotiating the complex legacy of Lee's economically successful but politically steel-fisted rule while maintaining the success for which Lee is largely, though not solely, responsible.

One of the many strengths of Lee Kuan Yew's legacy was his cultivation of Singapore as a "City in a Garden." Yet the concept is a controversial one: Singaporeans are divided between the desire to preserve historical heritage (including landmarks such as the Singapore Botanic Gardens and the Bukit Brown Cemetery) and the need to sustain Singapore's magnetism as a technology, finance, and tourism oasis (represented by the resort island of Sentosa and the high-tech super trees of the man-made Gardens by the Bay). Can a "city in a garden" be either a city or a garden? Or is it a political fiction that aestheticizes the messiness of actual existence? There are no easy answers in Singapore and this very complexity is what the conference organizers wanted to explore in a global, interdisciplinary context.

Sustainable Networks was jointly organized by the South Central Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (SCSECS) and the Centre for Liberal Arts and Social Sciences (CLASS) at NTU with generous assistance from the American Embassy in Singapore. The organizers wished to focus on interdisciplinary approaches to sustainability (broadly conceived and encompassing a full range of approaches from science-based environmentalism and literature-focused ecocriticism to cultural heritage and intellectual networks), but one major subsidiary goal was to explore how best to cultivate the "systems thinking" (or systems literacy) promoted by sustainability theorist Gillen D'Arcy Wood and others.<sup>2</sup> Systems thinking takes as a given the complexity of the

<sup>1</sup> "Singaporeans pay last respects to Lee Kuan Yew," *Al Jazeera English*, 29 March 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/03/singapore-set-honour-founding-father-lee-kuan-yew-150329011716568.html>

<sup>2</sup> Gillen D'Arcy Wood, "What Is Sustainability Studies?" *American Literary History* 24.1 (Spring 2012): 1–15. Wood defines "systems literacy" as "an evolved form of interdisciplinary



biosphere and of human society and acknowledges the value—indeed, the necessity—of making connections between disciplines, nations, human choices, and environmental phenomena. Wood, like eighteenth-century scholar and ecocritic John Sitter, urged humanities scholars to integrate environmentalism and sustainability awareness into their teaching and scholarship.<sup>3</sup> In their view, the world needs a vocal and active constituent of “green” humanities scholars who can channel raw data into narratives and case studies that are accessible to policy makers, voters, and consumers.<sup>4</sup>

Yet in some ways the conference questioned whether “sustainability” was ultimately achievable. These misgivings coincide with Greg Garrard’s argument in *Ecocriticism* that sustainability may not be the best way of theorizing resource management and protection of the environment. Can we really “save” endangered species, after all, or simply stave off extinction indefinitely? Garrard’s skepticism about “sustainability” is linked to his notion of “post-equilibrium ecology,” a way of thinking about the interconnections of natural processes in a way that avoids the “logic of pastoral” that aestheticizes the natural world by rendering it static, safe, and predictable and denying its radical otherness.<sup>5</sup> Can humanity extend justice to other species when differences are erased through anthropomorphism, or even simply ignored? This is one of the problems that the concept of “postequilibrium ecology” seeks to address.

Several senior scholars who attended the conference shared Garrard’s skepticism, though from very different disciplinary and ideological standpoints. Their skepticism was rooted in a number of criticisms of terminology throughout the conference. Terms such as “sustainability,” “collaboration,” and “critical thinking” came under fire from scholars who argued that these nominally positive terms are not only ambiguous buzzwords but that they could be used by university administrations to coerce scholars into corporate conformity. And perhaps there is no greater send up of “sustainability” than Jonathan Swift’s *A Modest Proposal*—a social model that sacrifices the moral and emotional dimensions of human existence to economic sustainability.

research practice and pedagogy that calls for intellectual competence (not necessarily command) in a variety of fields in order to better address specific, real-world environmental problems” (4).

<sup>3</sup> John Sitter, “Academic Responsibility and the Climate of Prosperity,” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment* 21, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 164–73.

<sup>4</sup> Wood, “What Is Sustainability Studies?” 13.

<sup>5</sup> Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 2nd ed., *The New Critical Idiom Series* (London: Routledge, 2012), 204.

The dark counterpart of sustainability is extinction and some scholars felt that the very terminology of sustainability does not speak for them and that being forced into conformity is a kind of destruction. Indeed, the conference brought out many latent (or not so latent) feelings of frustration that one's individual efforts were not—and perhaps could not be—appreciated under current institutional paradigms. The elephant in the room was clearly the question of whether the university is a sustainable institution. We did not arrive at a conclusion, but the act of questioning the conditions of academic life was refreshing, liberating, and—perhaps—productive of change. Only future generations of scholars will be able to tell.

From that somber note let me turn to the hopeful vistas the conference also introduced. Conferences—particularly ones dedicated to exploring “networks”—are, after all, about making connections, transforming perspectives, and experiencing the pleasing surprise of intellectual discoveries and affinities. Indeed Dr. Greg Clingham and Dr. Baerbel Czennia kicked off the conference, respectively, with a student-centered film discussion of adaptation (focused on the film version of *Atonement*, Ian McEwan's sophisticated critique of the institutions of empire and the literary canon) and a transnational history of the landscape garden that extended from the European Enlightenment to Singapore's contemporary Gardens by the Bay. These two introductions historicized institutions—military, economic, literary, aesthetic—that have existed since the Enlightenment and that inform the world today. The historical perspective gestured toward the conclusion that if the sustainability of discrete phenomena is not possible, perhaps the sustainability of adaptive networks is. Such a dynamic, relational understanding of sustainability would coincide not only with Garrard's argument for a “postequilibrium ecology” but also with Wood's argument for an awareness of the nonlinear complexity connecting the natural and human worlds and with the theorization of the “eco-georgic” by David Fairer, who delivered the conference Plenary Lecture and whose introduction to the forthcoming volume *Citizens of the World: Adapting in the Eighteenth Century* includes an overview of the changing conceptualization of “adaptation” in the eighteenth century.<sup>6</sup>

Fairer's critique of the complacency subtending the notion of adaptation-as-fitness dovetails with those of theorists of both ecocritical and adaptation theory who have urged a departure from a paradigm of “equilibrium”

<sup>6</sup> David Fairer, “‘All manag'd for the best': Ecology and the Dynamics of Adaptation,” in *Citizens of the World: Adapting in the Eighteenth Century*, eds. Kevin Cope and Samara Anne Cahill (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2015).

toward an acknowledgment that neither the natural world nor a source text is static.<sup>7</sup> As Dennis Cutchins observes, adaptation requires “an essential and persistent double-mindedness” that keeps the original source text and the adaptation in view without privileging either.<sup>8</sup> The sustainable textual networks that link history to an individual life keep the past alive through creative responsiveness to contextual particularity. When Gillen D’Arcy Wood enjoins humanities scholars to turn toward complexity, interconnection, and “systems literacy,” and when Greg Garrard urges a turn away from the “logic of pastoral” to a new “postequilibrium ecology,” they are lodging the same critique, from distinct disciplinary standpoints, that Cutchins makes when he urges a pedagogical oscillation between source text and adaptation. This is where mainstream eighteenth-century studies scholars can learn from the theoretical schools of ecocriticism and adaptation studies to use the canon against itself in a way that paradoxically preserves the canon while modifying it. If adaptation is responsiveness to environmental (including contextual) particularity, then perhaps it is the very engine of sustainability.

While the conference for the most part showcased global literary studies—as does this Special Feature—it was a truly interdisciplinary gathering that included environmental researchers, scientists, economists, ecofeminists, poets, theorists of pedagogy, and the intrepid former clerk of the British Parliament and expert on Portugal, British constitutional history, William Beckford, and Bernard Mandeville—Sir Malcolm Jack. Sir Malcolm’s Special Lecture for “Sustainable Networks” explored *The Arabian Nights* as a sustainable literary tradition that, despite its mysterious origins, has enabled different cultures to inform each other through the centuries via the open-ended act of storytelling. A revised version of this lecture is the first essay of our special feature and Sir Malcolm—like Garrard, Fairer, Sitter, and Wood—identifies flexibility and responsiveness to particular contexts as the key to sustaining literary tradition. Indeed, in Sir Malcolm’s memorable formulation, the *Nights* becomes a transhistorical global nomad, crossing cultures and centuries for as long as humans desire stories or storytellers.

<sup>7</sup> Building on Janice M. Lauer’s argument that “disequilibrium” can lead to the “discovery of insight,” Thomas Leitch urges that professors acknowledge “teaching adaptation as essential to undergraduate education in English studies.” See Thomas Leitch, “How to Teach Film Adaptations, and Why,” in *The Pedagogy of Adaptation*, eds. Dennis Cutchins, Laurence Raw, and James M. Welsh (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 2010), 1–20, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Dennis Cutchins, “Why Adaptations Matter to Your Literature Students,” in *The Pedagogy of Adaptation*, 87–95, 88.

Like Sir Malcolm, Erin Drew—one of the most promising of the rising generation of eighteenth-century ecocritics—turns to the distant past to meditate upon texts that furnish the most powerful models of sustainability. While Sir Malcolm attended to the narrative interweavings of Orient and Occident, Drew turns to the cradle of Western civilization to close-read the grappling with otherness at the heart of Book II of Virgil's *Georgics* and of Dryden's early modern translation of it. For Drew, the otherness of the natural world in relation to mankind does not demand human mastery or domination. Rather, man must work *with* nature in order to survive. Mastery is not sustainable, though careful husbandry is, and this is so because husbandry embodies the adaptability, flexibility, and contextual responsiveness to particularity that theorists of sustainability like Garrard and Wood urge.

From ancient Greece we turn to late imperial China with Chee Meng Wong's analysis of the flexible sustainability of Chinese classical literature, particularly responses by male and female writers to the classic novel *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. Wong shows that this beloved novel of the Chinese canon has not only been kept in circulation by sequel-writers of both sexes but has also been particularly used by women writers to put under complex scrutiny the patriarchal system of late imperial China. Confined largely to the home and having access mostly to "respectable" literature, female writers used the well-known, recognizable, and accepted narrative of *Red Chamber* and the love triangle at its center—between the sensitive Jia Baoyu, his soul mate, the melancholic poetess Lin Daiyu, and his conventionally feminine but admirable wife Xue Baochai—to rework women's place in literary production and patriarchal culture.

Moving from world literature to a consideration of how global trade networks affect natural resource shortages, Alexandra Cook studies Samuel Ostervald's eighteenth-century argument for sustainable forestry in the French- and German-influenced Swiss principality of Neuchâtel. Due to its production of watches and calico and its exemplification of the "technological side of the Enlightenment," Neuchâtel had a high demand for wood (as fuel for smithies and for dyeing and bleaching fabric; as material for wooden blocks and rollers for textile printing) in the production of its exports. Ostervald warned that the forests were not only being excessively denuded, but that new trees were not being planted in order to regenerate the depleted forests. While Ostervald was not listened to in his own day, the landslides and floods of the nineteenth century eventually prompted authorities to reforest the area. Switzerland's forests and forest-dwelling species have now rebounded to a degree that—while currently exceptional—is an encouragement to reforestation efforts across the world.

Forests can be depleted, but the contemporary world faces perhaps a more dire resource shortage: fresh water. The next essay is interdisciplinary and cowritten by a set of international scholars (Marlon Pareja, Sher Li Ong, Michelle Merrill, and Samara Anne Cahill) who consider how the shortage of fresh water—and related problems such as odor pollution, urban sanitation failures, and excessive water consumption—might be historicized, researched, and taught in the undergraduate classroom. The essay combines a variety of approaches to thinking through how the shortage of fresh water might register in historical literature and the contemporary world. These approaches include a survey of literary references to the odor pollution caused by failures of urban sanitation practices; the diverse socioeconomic responses to odor pollution; how these responses might map onto consumption patterns (of food and luxury items in the past and present); and how students might study both odor pollution and food consumption as indexes of water use both historically and in the contemporary world.

The special feature concludes with a revised version of Kevin Cope's Sustainable Networks keynote address. "Permanent Markers: The Monumental, the Mobile, and the Sustainable in Enlightenment Eras" is a bracing reminder that sustainability is not the only, and perhaps not the most desirable, response to environmental stressors. Yet Cope, too, focuses on the dynamism—the mobility—of adapting in the world. He envisions survival as a creative art rather than as a bid for personal immortality. Cope begins by setting against a backdrop of mortality—England on the cusp of the Civil Wars—James Howell's allegorized vision of British and European history *Dendrologia: Dodona's Grove, Or, The Vocal Forest* as the "big bang" of sustainability." Engineering an epic rollercoaster ride powered by intellectual energy that soars over and weaves through four centuries of history, disciplines, and attempts to monumentalize the self, Cope—like the narrator of *Tom Jones*—negotiates the descent from sublime prospect to ordinary life without causing his passengers to break their necks. It is this brush with the vertiginous that underscores the creative exhilaration that near extinction can produce. The prospect of death generates its own dark energy and from it survival, adaptation, and art originate.

As Cope sees it, the markers that most proclaim their sustainability are, paradoxically, those most in need of archival supplements: the museum, the encyclopedia, and the compilation. If, like Garrard, Cope is skeptical of monumental sustainability, his suspicions nevertheless point to a dynamic sustainability fostered by responsiveness to mutually beneficial networks: since sustainable landscapes need an archival supplement, then archives must be

sustainable, too. While Cope issues a bracing caveat to distinguish the heady dream of “sustainability” from the reality of the “sustaining” and the “sustained,” his pessimism is in the service of realistic endurance rather than hubristic fantasies of environmental control. Perhaps responsive networks, then, are the best way to model both environmental sustainability and—to return to the unanswered question of the Sustainable Networks Conference—the sustainability of universities, those monuments to intellectual tradition, adaptation, and creation.