Helen Tiffin, ed., *Five Emus to the King of Siam:
Environment and Empire*

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Helen Tiffin, ed. *Five Emus to the King of Siam: Environment and Empire*. Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2007. xviii, 260 p. ISBN: 978-90-420-2243-0. \$81,20

- 1 The splendidly titled *Five Emus to the King of Siam* represents another welcome addition to the rapidly developing field of postcolonial ecocriticism, even though its combative editor, Helen Tiffin, distances herself from ecocriticism as being too American and not interdisciplinary enough (xxvi). While this view used to have some truth to it, it now seems somehow dated, failing to acknowledge the increasingly global dimensions of the discipline as well as its newfound interdisciplinary energies (see the recent work of—admittedly Americans both—Larry Buell or Glen Love). In fact, several of the essays, notably Susie O'Brien's, appear to take issue with Tiffin's somewhat overdrawn assertions, suggesting that the volume might either be ecocritical in spite of itself or ecocritical in spirit if not editorial intent. Whatever it chooses to call itself, the volume is distinctly useful in bringing together animal and environmental criticism despite their well-documented differences, and in following the fraught connections between environment and Empire across a broad expanse of historical and geographical territory (Australia, Canada, the Caribbean, India, Kenya and the Pacific Islands all feature in the essays here).
- 2 At times, the volume's postcolonial remit invites lapses into an easy moralism, e.g. in the automatic assumption that tourism is just another word for neo-colonialism (27-28) or that indigenous people can do no environmental wrong (42). The essays also tend, understandably enough, to chart the negative effects of Empire on environment, while some also make the accompanying suggestion that a postcolonial form of 'ecological consciousness' and/or responsibility might go some way toward counteracting

authoritarian legacies of environmental violence—though, as Andrew McCann points out in one of the volume’s strongest essays, ‘ecological consciousness does not necessarily obviate barbarism’ (72), as in the Green fantasies attached to Germany’s National Socialist regime. The stronger essays in the volume, in fact, question the binaries that tend to emerge, possibly in spite of themselves, in the weaker ones. Ruth Blair’s well-researched essay on Pacific agricultural practices, for instance, implicitly echoes McCann’s caveat against the romantic proclivities of both postcolonialism and ecocriticism, their shared tendencies to moral triumphalism and high-handedness, and their self-serving instrumentalisation of ‘indigenous practice as a critique of Western capitalism’ (90); while Robert Dixon’s meticulous cultural-historical account of the so-called ‘Sandline affair’ in post-independence Papua New Guinea shows the extreme complexity of postcolonial ethnic rivalries and the various national/ transnational entanglements that are now being produced by current conditions of globalisation which, to some extent, represent an extension of the duplicitous logic of colonial rule. Such essays, while richly informative, still run the risk of seeming a little worthy; which is why the more eccentric touch of Chris Tiffin’s essay on the comically misguided attempts of colonial Acclimatisation Societies to ‘redistribute the biological riches of the planet’ (175)—one such attempt is inscribed in the volume’s title—is welcome, even if the consequences of those attempts were often damaging enough. Leigh Dale’s opening essay on the use of sheep as self-incriminating ‘proxies’ for the colonial occupation of Australia is similarly ingenious and witty, characteristics not always best served by the type of finger-wagging criticism for which postcolonialism and ecocriticism are—perhaps unfairly—known.

- 3 All in all, the essays gathered here represent both the best and worst of postcolonial ecocriticism; and occasionally, in the disparateness that is the reverse-side of their diversity, the best and worst at the same time. Perhaps this is the occupational hazard of any edited collection, and this one does the best it can by beginning and ending with strong essays and hiding a couple of weaker ones in between. Still, it is a shame that there are so few explicit connections between the essays: there is little evidence of cross-referencing, and little sense either of overall progression or shape. Some essays also appear to need updating (the conference from which the essays are drawn took place some time ago, and while some essays seem more up to the mark than others, all—including the Introduction—seem slightly out of date). Finally, Gillian Whitlock’s excellent closing essay raises the issue of ‘the comfort zone of white readers’ (245)—an issue that arguably applies to the volume, and possibly even to the emergent field of postcolonial ecocriticism, as a whole. Here, Tiffin’s complaint about the Euro-American dominance of ecocriticism may yet have some critical purchase. For if one of the potential benefits of postcolonial approaches to the environment is the factoring in of cultural difference to environmental debates, then that difference also needs to be registered at the level of representation; it is interesting, for example, to see how few ecocritical contributions there have been to date from Caribbean or Black African scholars, though there are some notable exceptions, and a large and ever-growing body of South Asian environmentalist critique. As Ruth Blair says in her essay, ‘the past [...] can teach us about other [non-Eurocentric] ways of living with the land’ (108); but so too can other (non-European) people, and it is to be hoped that the ecocritical fold may be enlarged, as it has been in postcolonial studies, to include those whose local knowledges are needed to test the boundaries of its critique.

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Graham HUGGAN is Chair of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Literatures in the School of English at the University of Leeds. Recent work includes *Australian Literature: Postcolonialism, Racism, Transnationalism* (Oxford UP, 2007) and *Interdisciplinary Measures: Literature and the Future of Postcolonial Studies* (Liverpool UP, 2008). He has recently completed three other books: *Writing Wrongs: Postcolonial Literatures, Animals and the Environment* (Routledge, co-written with Helen Tiffin), *Extreme Pursuits: Travel/Writing in an Age of Globalization* (U of Michigan P), and *Racism/Postcolonialism/Europe* (Liverpool UP, co-ed. with Ian Law) – all due to come out at the end of 2009.