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Approaching “a truly ‘ecological’ humanities” : Environmental Attentions and Postcolonial Methods

Global Ecologies and the Environmental Humanities: Postcolonial Approaches
edited by ELIZABETH DELOUGHREY, JILL DIDUR, and ANTHONY CARRIGAN
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Reviewed by JOSHUA BARTLETT

Ecocriticism and postcolonial studies have frequently made uneasy bedfellows. Ecocriticism’s first-wave tendencies toward pastoral nostalgia and “wilderness” commonly lacked substantive attention to issues of race, gender, and class, while its recent efforts to address global environmental crises often adopt a language of universality that elides important particularities of the rural poor, the Global South, and Indigenous populations. Situated at the intersection of the environmental humanities and postcolonial studies, *Global Ecologies and the Environmental Humanities: Postcolonial Approaches* embarks upon the difficult task of negotiating the desires, needs, and tensions of multiple scholarly fields—but ecocritics and postcolonialists alike will be pleased to find the collection an unequivocal success.

In their introduction, editors Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Jill Didur, and Anthony Carrigan commit to “a truly ‘ecological’ humanities [that is both] relational and interconnected” (9). As such, the collection’s interdisciplinarity emerges both between defined academic subjects and in engagements with fields such as subaltern and critical race studies that are themselves always already interdisciplinary. Likewise, DeLoughrey, Didur, and Carrigan

adopt a postcolonialism that stretches beyond a British/Anglophone purview to include Indigenous literatures, the Francophone Caribbean, and the former Soviet Union. They suggest a theoretical model in which the postcolonial doesn’t collapse into the “posthuman” but, rather, in which environmental humanities adopts postcolonial methodologies in order to consider “the already historical imbrication of the human with nonhuman nature and place” (11).

The introduction also serves to frame the volume via the question of narrative as “essential to determining how we interpret and mitigate environmental crisis” (25). The sixteen included essays not only illuminate “how we tell stories about ecology” but also “foreground how narrative . . . forms encode particular epistemologies and assumptions” (13, 25). Together, they study “the profound ways in which understandings of the environment are embedded in language . . . and the cultural imagination” (13).

A particular strength of the collection is the interaction of individual contributions within and across the five thematic sections, crossings that generate provocative counterpoints and valuable conversations. Often, this synchronicity appears via shared theoretical underpinnings—Rob Nixon’s “slow violence,” for instance, is a familiar touchstone—but such dialogues are equally generated by juxtaposition of the essays themselves.

David Arnold, for example, considers historical entanglements of “empire” and “environment” through a comparative reading of Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay’s *Aranyah: Of the Forest* and environmental health reports from colonial Calcutta. Noting that, despite their

“different narrative visions,” both texts rely on colonial “jungle” tropes, Arnold argues that this “shared idiom” demonstrates how imperialism’s traces are carried, often unwittingly, into postcolonial writing (46-47).

Countering Arnold’s cautionary tone, Jill Didur examines how texts implicated by empire—in this case, the travel narratives of British botanist Reginald Farrer—might, paradoxically, serve as “a resource for . . . the environmental humanities” (51). Drawing on Fernando Ortiz’s “transculturation,” Didur suggests that Farrer’s

advice to . . . gardeners on . . . creat[ing] the necessary ecological conditions for exotic alpinists to thrive . . . renegotiat[ed] . . . colonial ways of seeing foreign people, cultures, [and] landscapes . . . within the imperial center. (51-52)

Accordingly, Didur positions Farrer’s “colonial responses to alterity” as “a model for structuring counter-colonial global ecologies in the present” (54, 52).

Part I, “The Politics of Earth: Forests, Gardens, Plantations,” “draw[s] attention to how postcolonial readings . . . can unsettle colonial and nationalist framings of ecology” (17). Taking Australia’s 1992 *Mabo* decision regarding Aboriginal land rights as a transformative moment, Susan K. Martin considers how post-*Mabo* fiction “narrat[es] [the] cultivation of space” via representations of “native gardens” that aspire toward “postcolonial reconciliation” while simultaneously recognizing the “impossibility . . . of such a dream” (107, 108-109). Likewise, Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert troubles colonial ecologies by reading *bagasse*, the residue of sugar cane,

as a means for theorizing the testimonial capacity of “imperial debris” (85). Analyzing work such as Hervé Beuze’s *bagasse*-filled sculptures of Martinique and Atelier Morales’s photographs of plantation infrastructure, Paravisini-Gebert keenly explores the remainders and ruins of the colonial past as “revenants”—or ghosts—that haunt the postcolonial present (79).

Part II, “Disaster, Vulnerability, and Resilience,” merges environmental humanities with the field of disaster studies. In “Towards a Postcolonial Disaster Studies,” Anthony Carrigan invokes Nixon’s “slow violence” as well as Naomi Klein’s “disaster capitalism” in considering “postcolonial studies as a form of disaster studies and vice versa” (117). Following a quite-useful “genealogy of disaster studies,” Carrigan reads Kamau Braithwaite’s *MR* as “a performative example” of the formal hybridity that such a theoretical paradigm might embody (118, 131). Carrigan’s efforts are given further life by Barbara Rose Johnson’s essay on the “nuclear colonialism” of the Marshall Islands, which she deftly links to the politics of information management following the 2011 Fukushima disaster (140).

Part III, “Political Ecologies and Environmental Justice,” continues to focus on narrative in essays ranging from Dandakaranya to the Niger Delta. Susie O’Brien’s work on Arundhati Roy’s *Walking with the Comrades* cogently critiques conventional values of “resilience” by focusing on the term’s implied tensions between change and conservation—invoking Wendy Brown’s *Edgework* as a critical methodology “to explore the limits of . . . imagining present crises, and the capacity of critique to forward the aims of justice” (201). Likewise, Byron Caminero-Santangelo astutely explores how Helon

Habila's *Oil on Water* and Nuruddin Farah's *Crossbones* use journalist-figures to emblemize searches for truth within contemporary African violence—noting that, while Habila's focus on individual experience elides violence's historical causes, *Crossbones's* "refus[al of] . . . totalizing . . . narrative" enables "attention to . . . the connections and tensions among as many kinds of . . . discourses . . . as possible" (240).

Part IV, "Mapping World Ecologies," makes significant contributions to the "syllabus" of postcolonial environmental humanities. Cheryl Lousley's critique of the 1987 UN report *Our Common Future*, for example, references Dipesh Chakrabarty, Homi Bhabha, and Hannah Arendt—while Michael Niblett's "Oil on Sugar: Commodity Frontiers and Peripheral Aesthetics" is notable both for his trenchant analysis of "the substance and semiotics of oil" in Laura Restrepo's *The Dark Bride* and his use of Sylvia Wynter's indispensable "Novel and History, Plot and Plantation" to explore the "saccharine-irrealism" of novels such as Janice Shinebourne's *The Last English Plantation* (273, 277).

Part V, "Terraforming, Climate Change, and the Anthropocene," engages criticism's recent "planetary" turn. Joseph Masco's "Terraforming Planet Earth" presents a fascinating and multivalent reading of "fallout" in relation to both its historical context within "nuclear age militarism," and its emergence "as a new structuring principle of American modernity" (309, 311)—suggesting fallout's potential for "a planetary atmospheric politics" and "new planetary optics" (329). George B. Handley's nuanced reading of Derek Walcott's *Omeros* addresses the planetary via the rhetoric of cosmology. For Handley, Walcott's "nature" is always

already a postcolonial formation that refuses "originary purity" (342). Thus, he argues that Walcott "accommodate[s] . . . our interconnectivity . . . with others and with the planet . . . [without] fall[ing] back into easy notions of 'oneness'" in order to form the "sense of a contingent world" (334, 348).

In the collection's final essay, Elizabeth DeLoughrey contemplates the planetary via oceanic studies. Returning to Part II, DeLoughrey asks compelling questions regarding "the efficacy of apocalyptic discourse" and proposes "a turn to nonspectacular ecological violence" (352, 353). Here, she reads Keri Hulme's *Stonefish* as demonstrative of how "rendering the sea . . . as profoundly ordinary" can "activate our ecological imagination[s]" through "fluid waterworld[s] of queer kinships"—rather than narratives of crisis and catastrophe (357-358). Drawing on work by Jane Bennett and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, DeLoughrey elegantly theorizes *Stonefish's* mutating mushrooms and "sulking" fruit trees as an "interspecies worlding" that "narratively imagin[es] a relationship to the oceanic through ordinary modes of merger and submersion—an adaptive, interspecies hermeneutics for the rising tides of the Anthropocene" (360, 367).

As with any collection, gaps remain. Increased attention to postcolonial drama, for example, is warranted, as is greater presence of Indigenous scholarship. These are opportunities for future studies, however, more so than blind spots, and the work gathered here should prove inspiring for such investigations. Its methods inviting and its contents invaluable, this volume is as timely in theme as it is vibrant in substance.

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