



PROJECT MUSE®

Exploring Narratives of Global Justice and Sustainability: The Rise of Postcolonial Ecocriticism

Ríona Kelly

MFS Modern Fiction Studies, Volume 59, Number 1, Spring 2013, pp. 175-181
(Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2013.0020>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/504046>



**EXPLORING NARRATIVES OF
GLOBAL JUSTICE AND
SUSTAINABILITY: THE RISE OF
POSTCOLONIAL ECOCRITICISM**

Ríona Kelly

Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley, eds. *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment*. New York: Oxford UP, 2011. xi + 348 pp.

Bonnie Roos and Alex Hunt, eds. *Postcolonial Green: Environmental Politics and World Narratives*. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2010. xi + 301 pp.

Although the field of postcolonial ecocriticism is developing rapidly, there have been few attempts to gather together scholarship in this area in a cohesive manner. Patrick D. Murphy's *Farther Afield in the Study of Nature-Oriented Literature*, published in 2000, was the first ecocritical collection to consider global literature, while Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin's more recent *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* took this one step further by applying a combined ecocritical and post-colonial approach. The two volumes considered here, *Postcolonial Ecologies* and *Postcolonial Green*, build on previous studies and demonstrate how environmental and historical issues can be brought together in productive dialogue. As such, both collections demonstrate

in different ways the variety and scope of current scholarship and represent a significant contribution to the field.

In *Postcolonial Ecologies*, Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley build on their previous collection with Renee K. Gosson, *Caribbean Literature and the Environment: Between Nature and Culture*. They describe their latest venture as "the first collection of essays to engage literatures from Africa, the Caribbean, South Asia, and the Pacific Islands in their postcolonial constructions of the environment" (34). Perhaps this collection's greatest achievement is not only the geographical and thematic scope of the essays within it, but also the ongoing advancement of the theoretical field itself outlined by DeLoughrey and Handley in their introduction. For this reason alone *Postcolonial Ecologies* will be a valuable asset to scholars engaged in this method of criticism. They draw insightful examples from canonical figures such as Frantz Fanon and Edward Said in order to highlight "that histories embedded in the land and sea have always provided vital and dynamic methodologies for understanding the transformative impact of empire and the anticolonial epistemologies it tries to suppress" (4). The introduction reads somewhat like a manifesto for the working advancement of postcolonial ecocriticism and would serve newcomers and established scholars equally well. Arguing that the origins of postcolonial ecology recall the colonial transportation of nature, the editors are critical of the continued Anglo American orientation of ecocritical thought. They note the valuable contribution of scholars such as Patrick D. Murphy and Rob Nixon in going beyond the geographical limitations of the area and also in proposing a valuable combination of ecocriticism with postcolonial theory. Having outlined both approaches, they propose a theory they term an "aesthetics of the earth," described as "a discourse of transformative self-conscious disruption that calls attention to the universalizing impulses of the global—as a key aspect of postcolonial ecocriticism" (28). The phrase "aesthetics of the earth" is borrowed from Eduard Glissant and questions how we may appreciate land that has borne colonial violence and, in doing so, may create a regenerative response that addresses notions of environmental and social justice.

The volume is organized into four distinct themes. The first, "Cultivating Place," engages with the concept of the garden as a site of interaction for nature and culture. The three essays that comprise the section consider the trope of the Edenic garden in Indian and Caribbean literature respectively and engage with how it sheds light on the exploitative aspects of colonial reality. In her analysis of Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, Jill Didur argues that the novel's colonial representation of the Himalayas as Edenic or paradisiacal offers us a hybrid space, one that "investigates the

cultural and environmental effects of these modes of seeing, and challenges colonial notions of retreat and innocence associated with hill station environments and communities in a postcolonial context" (44). Elaine Savory's essay on Derek Walcott's poetry and LeGrace Benson's examination of visual arts in Haiti demonstrate the practical application of DeLoughrey and Handley's "aesthetics of the earth" in considering poetic and visual representations of how landscapes are irredeemably altered by colonialism.

In "Deforestation and the Yearning for Lost Landscapes in Caribbean Literatures," Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert considers the long-term natural and cultural impact of colonial land clearing. Using a detailed description of the multilayered history of colonialism in the Caribbean, she draws on texts such as Bartolomé de las Casas's *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* to illustrate the historical arguments that associated forest clearing with control of the native population. She then uses this to inform her analysis of the work of Puerto Rican poet Juan Antonio Corretjer, who imagines a recovery of the lost space of the forest. In Paravasini-Gebert's reading of Corretjer's work, the "symbolic relationship between the forests and modernity continues to be articulated through the representation of the forests as the 'natural' domain of the indigenous or the Creole" (112). George Handley's innovative approach to Alejo Carpentier's *The Lost Steps* explores the nuanced relationships between nature and culture in the Latin American context by reading beyond the overt masculinist or neocolonial tones of the text. Instead, he perceives the narrative as being in perpetual dialogue between the natural world and human consciousness, and cautions against a simplistic binary reading of Carpentier's rejection of the city in favor of the Amazonian wilderness.

The third section in the volume considers the relationships between human and nonhuman animals in order to "encompass postcolonial questions of justice, representation, conservation, and biomythic narratives" (32). Focusing on game reserves in South Africa, Rob Nixon portrays the reserves as problematic spaces where the tourist is offered a glimpse of a "natural" or "timeless" Africa, which not only raises issues of exclusivity that hark back to apartheid era politics, but also obliterate or render invisible colonial history (160). Allison Carruth's essay on J. M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* questions human compassion toward animals and, by extension, toward other humans. She suggests that the environmentalism discussed in the novel through the consumption of meat indicates the broader concern of human complicity in the exploitation of not only animals, but also people. Lack of human compassion for both humans and non-humans is also a central concern in Pablo Mukherjee's analysis of Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*, which raises questions about the

systems that tackle the human and environmental cost of the Bhopal disaster. He argues that by declaring he is not human, Sinha's narrator, Animal, thereby exposes "the horrendous logic of global corporatism that recognizes only the powerful and privileged as capable of bearing signs of humanity—including practices such as rights and justice" (230).

The concept of militourism, "a term coined by American Indian writer Louis Owens and theorized by Teresia Teaiwa to explain the mutual constitution of the tourist and military industries, particularly in the islands tropics" (33), comprises the volume's final section. Elizabeth DeLoughrey argues in her essay "Heliotropes" that modern ecology can be traced to the Cold War and atomic fallout, and that current solar and military forms of radiation form key elements of globalization. Extending the existing boundaries of postcolonial ecocriticism to incorporate solar ecologies, she furnishes an analysis of a number of indigenous Pacific writers such as Witi Ihimaera and Chantal Spitz as a means of questioning military presence and testing in the region. In "Out of This Great Tragedy Will Come a World Class Tourism Destination," Anthony Carrigan examines diaster ecology and tourism development in Sri Lanka. Referring to Chandani Lokugé's novel *Turtle's Nest*, he illustrates the correlation between globalization, local cultures, and environments in post-tsunami Sri Lanka, examining not only environmental degradation but also child-sex tourism and animal abuse. What Carrigan's essay achieves, therefore, is a depiction of the inseparability of environmental and social concerns.

Bonnie Roos and Alex Hunt's *Postcolonial Green* focuses on a central theme of social and environmental justice. Like *Postcolonial Ecologies*, it takes a concerted global approach to literature in this field, and this volume responds to the challenge of extending ecocriticism beyond a focus on the US. In concentrating on environmental and social justice, it builds on existing environmental justice ecocriticism, which in contrast to ecocriticism "tends to value conservation/preservation discourse, [and] tends to be transnational in its attentions, considering for example, how industrial waste is not contained by national borders" (3). *Postcolonial Green* broadens this scope through a collection of essays that examine more thoroughly how colonial and neocolonial power structures have impacted global environmental issues. In their introduction, Roos and Hunt make extensive use of the term "globalism," which they define as "a latter-day colonialism based upon economic and cultural imperialism" (3). They envisage this concept as one that describes how global industry implies a search for land and natural resources that has major environmental effects, one that is inextricably connected to postcolonial concerns.

Divided into four sections focusing on Asia and the South Pacific, Africa, North America, and South America and the Caribbean,

the collection foregrounds the concept of the earth as a global community in which issues of social justice are intrinsically bound to the environmental. The inclusion of a section devoted to North American topics initially appears problematic in a collection that aims to broaden the horizons of ecocritical and postcolonial study beyond its current limitations. However, Caskey Russell's investigation of the environmental and social tensions over whale hunting rights between the US and the indigenous Makah, for example, is a relevant inclusion as it draws comparisons with Laura Wright's essay on Maori exploitation by Western colonial powers in Keri Hulme's *The Bone People*. Likewise, Rachel Stein's examination of Ruth Ozeki's *All Over Creation* furthers Russell's discussion of food and subsistence rights through a debate on the impact of the fast-food industry on agricultural production. This in turn draws a parallel to the topics covered by Jonathan Highfield in his essay, "Relations with Food," focusing on agriculture and colonialism in the writings of the South African-born Bessie Head.

The majority of the essays in this collection approach literary texts by asking how they portray colonial exploitation and environmental devastation. Some, like Pablo Mukherjee's innovative reading of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, propose an aesthetic approach to the stylistic intricacies of the novel, which calls to mind DeLoughrey and Handley's "aesthetics of the earth." By examining what he calls the stylistic unevenness of Roy's text, Mukherjee perceives the environment as being as integral to the novel as the social and political context. Arguing that "Roy belongs to the radical school of thinking that sees politics and environment, 'nature' and 'culture' as necessarily and mutually interpenetrated" (18), Mukherjee posits an approach to the novel that incorporates Gagil and Guha's "social ecology" and Trotsky's idea of "combined and uneven development" (22). Using the concept of the performing storyteller, or *Kathakali*, he argues that Roy borrows from the *Kathakali*'s multiple and shifting narrative technique and arrangement of space in the production of performance, concluding that the evident unevenness in Roy's style can be read "as a response to and intervention into the environment of uneven development of postcolonial India" (29). Mukherjee's convincing use of the concept of *Kathakali* demonstrates an engaged response to the novel that simultaneously highlights the human and environmental concerns evident in Roy's work.

In "Jungle Tide, Devouring Reef" Sharae Deckard examines the depiction of the jungle and coral reefs in Sri Lankan literature from the colonial and postcolonial periods. She illustrates an evident awareness in Sri Lankan literature of the correlations between environmental destruction and modernization through a critical analysis of three novels. Both Leonard Woolf's *The Village in the Jungle* and John Still's *The Jungle Tide*, written prior to decolonization, connect destruction

of the natural environment and disruption of local biosystems to imperialism. In the second half of the essay, she considers Romesh Gunsekera's *Reef*, which incorporates environmental and political issues attached to the Mahaweli Dam scheme. Through a critical consideration of these novels, Deckard offers an illustrative trajectory of nature-orientated literature in the Sri Lankan context, from the "green imperialism" of Woolf and Still's novels to the postcolonial ecocriticism of Gunsekera's, emphasizing the relevance of considering these works within a historical framework (47). Sabine Wilke's essay on Humboldt's *Ansichten der Natur* offers a similar approach in considering the production of a colonial text. Using the concept of "performing tropics," she examines how during the colonial period nature was framed within a cultural context and portrayed in terms of a spectacle for a European audience (197). Central to this approach is an "understanding of the relationship between the self and the other that plays itself out in the idea of the spectacle" (198), and Wilke draws attention to the recognition and portrayal of the otherness of the New World. Both Wilke's and Deckard's essays demonstrate the nuanced ways in which these works not only negotiate nature and culture but simultaneously offer a critique of colonialism.

As expected in a collected volume on postcolonial ecocriticism, the African section includes a consideration of J. M. Coetzee's work. Sheng-Yen Yu centers his critical analysis on the figure of the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, arguing that the memorial the character writes toward the conclusion of the narrative "betokens Coetzee's committed literary and philosophical investigation as a novelist of the interpenetrating question of empire, colonialism, and environment" (97). The concept of colonialism broached by Yu as disrupting a previous way of life in his examination of Coetzee's text is echoed in Patrick D. Murphy's consideration of Neruda's *Canto General* and Cardenal's *Cosmic Canticle*, in which he explores issues of inhabitation and sustainability in both works. The question of sustainability is an important aspect of the overarching theme of environmental and social justice and seems particularly poignant in the context of Latin America where it can be problematic to apply the postcolonial to countries such as Chile and Nicaragua when, for both Neruda and Cardenal, economic and political hegemony persists following national independence. As Ursula K. Heise notes in her lucid afterword to the collection, what *Postcolonial Green* accomplishes is to draw attention to the ways in which "the aesthetic transformation of the real has a particular potential for reshaping the individual and collective ecosocial imaginary" (258).

Both *Postcolonial Green* and *Postcolonial Ecologies* embrace this notion of the transformative potential of aesthetic production for

global justice and sustainability. What these two anthologies demonstrate is the relevance of postcolonial ecocriticism in contemporary scholarship, and they achieve this in an accessible and informative manner. Ultimately, these collections are a valuable indicator of the rich potential of further explorations in this field and demonstrate the "need to recover an appreciation for the relevance of the humanities in the face of the global environmental challenges of the twenty-first century" (DeLoughrey and Handley 34).