

## Fragile symbioses: introducing new routes for postcolonial ecocriticism

Lucio De Capitani and Shaul Bassi

Ca' Foscari University of Venice

The relationship between the postcolonial and the environmental depends on how you look at it and from where you are looking at it. One's vantage point may suggest convergences, divergences, affinities, symbiosis, distance. For instance, in former settler colonies such as Canada and Australia, environmental exploitation and colonial racism were often part of the same discourse, and several postcolonial authors developed alternative forms of ecopoetics to the dominant Western paradigms of nature writing. Elsewhere, in other postcolonial literary and artistic cultures, the representation of emerging identities went hand in hand with an intimate engagement with nature and landscape; and modes of marginalized indigenous knowledge were expressed through new hybrid cultural forms. More generally, many postcolonial texts, famous and less famous, have provided precious environmental insights even when literary exegetes have read them with other critical priorities.

However, if we look at the postcolonial/environmental relationship from an academic perspective, points of friction and tension have frequently been registered. A relatively early example may be the seminal anthology *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm in 1996, which begins by deploring the conspicuous absence of any ecological content from another groundbreaking collection. In *Redrawing the Boundaries. The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies* (Greenblatt and Giles 1992), new theoretical approaches were ratified, which placed race, class, and gender as new regulative ideas, and most essays (including "Postcolonial Criticism" by Homi K. Bhabha) were championing a presentist and political interpretation of literature, challenging more traditional forms of literary analysis. This made this absence, in the eyes of Cheryll Glotfelty, even more surprising: "Although scholarship claims to have 'responded to contemporary pressures', it has apparently ignored the most pressing contemporary issue of all, namely, the global environmental crisis" (1996, xv). However, the problem was arguably more ramified and also depended on the fact that ecocriticism may have projected a very localized version of itself – one that, even in the new *Ecocriticism Reader*, was revisionist and self-reflexive, open to interdisciplinarity and interested in indigenous culture, but almost

exclusively American in its purview. In the same confrontational introduction, Glotfelty advocated a militant ecocriticism, capable of changing the academic profession and having a social impact, along the lines of other forms of criticism: “We have witnessed the feminist and multi-ethnic critical movements radically transform the profession, the job market, and the canon. And because they have transformed the profession, they are helping to transform the world” (xxiv). In hindsight, it is striking how the ecocritical seems to be implicitly other than the “multi-ethnic critical movements.”

A few years later, Rob Nixon could still talk about “mutually constitutive silences between environmental and postcolonial literary studies” (2011, 235) and identified “four main schisms” that kept postcolonial theory and ecocriticism apart. Postcolonialists foregrounded hybridity, displacement, cosmopolitanism, transnationalism, marginalized pasts and border histories; ecocritics celebrated wilderness and preservation, place and national traditions, timeless transcendentalism and communion with nature; they mythologized empty lands and repressing the colonization and genocide of native people (236). And yet, in spite of these schisms, conversations have developed over the years, and the new millennium has certainly enriched the exchange, dialogue and contamination between the two fields. New waves of ecocriticism have moved towards forms of eco-cosmopolitanism that recognize ethnic and indigenous perspectives, North-South dynamics, and interspecies entanglements; and the growing urgency and evidence of the environmental crisis, the development of the environmental humanities and posthuman critical theory, the debates over the Anthropocene and its rival definitions, and the exponential growth of ecological migrants and refugees accelerate the need for a productive dialogue. However, it remains important to concentrate on silences, pitfalls, and blind spots, because they continue to affect the academic and, even more, the public fields connected to the environmental and the postcolonial. For instance, Gabriele Dürbeck (2019) has recently summarized various postcolonial critiques of the Anthropocene discourse that has, by and large, supplanted the more traditional literary ecocriticism but which clearly runs the risk of reiterating some of its mistakes.

These examples, taken from different recent time periods, show how tension remains between two intellectual fields that, while cogently converging in the works of scholars and writers such as Dipesh Chakrabarty, Amitav Ghosh, Elizabeth DeLoughrey and others, continue to operate separately in many contexts. And if we widen our lens to consider less academic domains, we could consider the cautionary situation of Italy, where environmentalism exists in the public sphere either as a disaster narrative or as a reassuring eulogy of sustainability, while the postcolonial condition is translated into a securitarian propaganda about migration.

This special focus aims to contribute to these debates by exploring new routes – new symbioses – between the postcolonial and the environmental. The articles we have chosen

have certainly addressed many of the topics we initially proposed (such as the possible exchanges between posthuman critical theory and postcolonial theories, the importance of Non-Western ecologies and Indigenous knowledge, postcolonial literary and artistic responses to the environmental crisis, climate migration and climate racism) but have also gone beyond them and favourably surprised us, mapping new trajectories for the continuing conversation between the ecological and the postcolonial.

### Overview of the special focus

The special focus opens with an interview with postcolonial studies veteran Graham Huggan. Having worked for a long time at the intersection of postcolonial and environmental studies, Huggan provides unique and unorthodox perspectives on some key nodes of the postcolonial-environmental humanities debate and offers a fruitful counterpoint to the rest of the special focus. Key insights from the interview include the relationship between postcolonialism and ecocriticism (perhaps not so fraught as others may claim?); the new orthodoxies of ecocriticism; the tediousness of neologisms; the pleasures of collaboration as opposed to superficial, institutionalised interdisciplinarity; and the paradoxical joys of working on the poetics and politics of extinction.

Besides Huggan's intervention – and besides the photographic series that ends the issue – the special focus hosts four essays, engaging with diverse histories, geographies and spaces that range from the toxic landscape of African postcolonies and the post-nuclear Pacific Islands to the farmlands of Baltimore and the digital spaces of interaction between humans and AI. They all, however, share an interest in developing new (postcolonial) methodologies that can productively attend to materiality – including the materiality of bodies –, its agency and the stories it can tell. Their overall critical tendencies do, to an extent, confirm Huggan's assessment in the interview that new materialist approaches are overwhelmingly prominent in this phase of ecocriticism – even, clearly, as ecocriticism finds new ways to merge with postcolonialism. More generally, the essays all look for ways to intermingle (more or less) traditional postcolonial concerns and approaches with a variety of critical perspectives, be they indigenous knowledge or posthumanism, in order to address environmental crises.

Elijah Doro's article is an invitation from the field of environmental history to deploy postcolonial and decolonial methodologies (but also, arguably, to *update* those methodologies) in order to uncover the chemical histories of (post)colonial Africa – a project whose urgency is motivated by the relative lack of exchanges between African and environmental history. Uncovering silenced histories has been, of course, a staple of postcolonial criticism. The challenge, in this case, is particularly hard because, as Doro argues, “the terrains of chemical violence are occluded, opaque and without immediate physical and concrete evidence that

can be urgently presented as proof,” thus further facilitating the process of removal of colonial (chemical/toxic and slow) violence from the historical archive. Doro, after an overview of a variety of cases from various parts of the African continent, invites thus the development of methodologies that make toxic exposures, their deadly effects and lingering aftermaths available to the senses, unmasking an invisible but lethal and pervasive aspect of coloniality. The article ends by sketching a “new disciplinary frontier” for African environmental history in order to counter the “wastocene logic” at the roots of these toxic legacies and, at the same time, to activate new communities beyond those merely surviving in the midst of the “toxic epidemic.”

The article by Sophie von Redecker and Christian Herzig, “Can nature speak?,” also argues that received silences and invisibilities need to be overturned by methodological shifts of perspective. In particular, it takes its cue from Gayatri Spivak’s classic essay to interrogate the silencing of ‘nature’ in our current colonial epistemological regime. The authors argue that to the extent nature is cast as a ‘other’ and is represented, in hegemonic climate discourse, as a passive object or, at best, a threat, it patently cannot speak. And yet, by combining postcolonial, decolonial, multispecies and indigenous perspectives, they also bring to light “contexts, ontologies, epistemologies and place-bound practices in which ‘nature’s ability to speak is existent, perceived, influential and, above all, unquestioned.” The article thus gestures towards expanding definitions of languages as more than verbal communication (and thus as a bastion of human exceptionalism). Crucial in Redecker’s and Herzig’s understanding of ‘nature’ as fundamentally *able* to speak is the voice of five Baltimore farmers, whose insights on nature’s capacity to communicate constitute a prologue and a source of theoretical insight for the essay, as well as a declaration of situated criticism: the essay, they state, “is written first and foremost from a farming perspective.”

Chiara Lanza’s article focuses, like Doro’s, on the way bodies (and matter) can store toxic histories but zooms in on prominent Marshallese poet Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner, whose work, combining poetry, reportage, activism, and performance, has notoriously tackled the legacy of nuclear colonialism in the Pacific Islands. Lanza reads a portion of her corpus from a seemingly unusual perspective for an Island poet: soil – not to impose “a land-centric view on the poet’s work,” but rather to discuss the elaborate entanglements between land and sea in an Oceanic context. Elaborating on Jetñil-Kijiner’s idea that the land sees and remembers – a concept familiar to soil science as well – she discusses the way in which, in Jetñil-Kijiner’s poetry, earth and rocks are connected to and embody (cultural) memory, including by being inhabited by the “technofossils of our era,” such as Styrofoam and glass. Moreover, by relying on the concept of environmental ecotone (an area of transitions between ecological communities), which allows her to juxtapose and compare soil and human bodies as similarly porous, vulnerable territories, Lanza interprets the frequent theme of eating and being eaten in Jetñil-

Kijiner's work to stress the connection, within Pacific ecologies, between pollution, food and disease.

Andrea Barcaro's essay, the most methodologically unconventional in this special issue, engages in a form of "speculative experimentation": he works with an algorithm, the Midjourney Bot, which creates AI-generated images based on the prompts it receives, to produce a series of visual creations that he uses as props for advancing and fostering the essay's arguments. The article thus unfolds as an AI-supported (meta)commentary on the connection between technology and emerging posthuman identities. By commenting on the images produced by the bot after being fed quotes by a variety of scholars in the digital and environmental humanities, postcolonialism and posthumanism and other branches of critical theory, Barcaro shows how these branches of scholarly discourse can merge in meaningful exchanges – in this case, by variously tackling seemingly unrelated but intertwined topics such as, among others, border policies and design practices in the Anthropocene.

Lastly, the special issue ends with an artistic contribution: photographer Nicola Lo Calzo's *Obia* series, in which indigenous (ecological) knowledge and lived experience, variously evoked throughout the issue as crucial interlocutors to postcolonial ecocriticism, take centre stage. The result of an artistic residency among the Bushinengués, Maroon communities of the Guiana plateau, this series captures several key social and cultural moments in the life of these populations. As Lo Calzo explains in the introductory piece to the series, the Bushinengué communities struggle with transmitting their heritage against assimilation into urban models and beyond mere patrimonialization, which the colonial administrative frameworks push them towards; and they have to confront the fact that their specific relationship with nature, at odds with the European notion of the virgin forest and focusing instead on the forest as a place of sociability, is becoming increasingly fragile. Nevertheless, while documenting these challenges, the series presents the Bushinengués as contributors to political and ecological consciousness in the Americas.

## References

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**Lucio De Capitani** is a postdoctoral researcher at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. His research interests include colonial and postcolonial literatures (especially Indian writing in English, the work of Amitav Ghosh and Robert Louis Stevenson), theories of world literature, the connections between anthropology and literary studies, and ecocriticism (with a special focus on cli-fi and solarpunk). He has co-edited the collection *Venice and the Anthropocene. An Ecocritical Guide* (2022, wetlands) and recently published *Ethnographic Narratives as World Literature. Uneven Entanglements in European and South Asian Writing* (2023, Palgrave). E-mail: [lucio.decapitani@unive.it](mailto:lucio.decapitani@unive.it)

**Shaul Bassi** is full professor of English literature and head of studies of the Master's Degree in Environmental Humanities. He has taught at Ca' Foscari University of Venice since 2000. His research, teaching and publications are divided between Shakespeare, environmental humanities, postcolonial theory and literature (India and Africa), and Jewish studies. He has taught at Wake Forest University-Venice, Venice International University, Harvard-Ca' Foscari summer school and has been visiting professor at the University of California at Santa Cruz. He is the co-founder and former director of the international literary festival Incroci di Civiltà and the former director of the International Center for the Humanities and Social Change at Ca' Foscari. E-mail: [bassi@unive.it](mailto:bassi@unive.it)