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Italy
europeansouth@postcolonialitalia.it

Cover Image: Stephano, a young Ndjuka on the bank of Maroni river, Village de Belicampo, French Guiana. Photo by Nicola Lo Calzo. Courtesy of Nicola Lo Calzo.

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SPECIAL FOCUS

EXPLORING NEW ROUTES IN THE POSTCOLONIAL ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES

Guest editors

Lucio De Capitani and Shaul Bassi,

Ca' Foscari University of Venice

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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 "wasteocene 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.

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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

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

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From ecocriticism to extinction, and beyond: an interview with Graham Huggan

Graham Huggan

University of Leeds

Lucio De Capitani

Ca' Foscari University of Venice

Shaul Bassi

Ca' Foscari University of Venice

ABSTRACT

In this interview, Lucio De Capitani and Shaul Bassi invite literary/cultural studies scholar Graham Huggan to a reflection on the relationship between postcolonialism and ecocriticism; on the state of the art of environmental discourse in academia; on the genres of climate narratives; on language politics in the environmental humanities; and on the new developments in the field he is most interested in, which include, most notably and perhaps somehow surprisingly, the poetics and politics of extinction.

Keywords

Postcolonial ecocriticism; interdisciplinarity; neoliberal academia; indigenous knowledge; extinction

Graham Huggan is one of the best-known voices in postcolonial literary/cultural studies, though his research has also involved tourism studies, contemporary film, and the environmental humanities. His vast scholarly production ranges from the classic *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (Routledge, 2001) to, more recently, his monograph *Colonialism, Culture, Whales: The Cetacean Quartet* (Bloomsbury Press, 2018), and the co-authored book *Modern British Nature Writing, 1789-2020: Land Lines* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

Huggan's approach to postcolonial studies has consistently paid attention to issues of cross-disciplinarity and the environment: he is founding co-editor of the 'Postcolonialism across the Disciplines' series for Liverpool University Press (which includes his revised collected essays, *Interdisciplinary Measures: Literature and the Future of Postcolonial Studies*, 2009); and, perhaps most importantly for this discussion, he is co-author, together with Helen Tiffin, of the seminal work *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*: *Literature, Animals, Environment*

(Routledge 2010; second edition 2015). With these credentials, there is hardly a better interlocutor for the following discussion on the postcolonial environmental humanities.

Lucio De Capitani and Shaul Bassi: Graham, could you help us historicize the uneasy relationship between ecocriticism and postcolonial studies? What is your personal intellectual trajectory in this respect? Can you think of specific milestones and inflection points (books, events, conferences, places)?

Graham Huggan: I'm not sure I'd see the relationship as being that fraught. There were early grumblings about the parochialism of some versions of ecocriticism – not that postcolonial studies has been without its own parochial tendencies – but I think it's been recognized for a good while now that postcolonial and ecocritical methods and ways of looking at the world are intertwined. I'm not sure either that I see a particular breakthrough moment here, though the work of some critics, Rob Nixon and Liz DeLoughrey for instance, has been consistently influential over the past couple of decades, and Cajetan Iheka is a major new player on the postcolonial-ecocritical scene.

LDC/SB: Climate and environmental issues are arguably becoming more and more 'mainstream'. As a pioneer in postcolonial ecocriticism, what do you think are the opportunities and risks of this conjuncture?

GH: It's true that these issues have become mainstream, but there's always the danger of orthodoxies in any given field: look at the current stranglehold of new materialism over ecocriticism, as exemplified in seemingly de rigueur citations, not always suitably contextualized, of Donna Haraway and Karen Barad. And no, I'm not a pioneer in postcolonial ecocriticism, nor would Helen [Tiffin] see herself as one. Our book just happened to be written at the right time.

LDC/SB: With the proliferation of environmental/climate discourse, there is also a proliferation of paradigms and (inter-)disciplinary formations (the Anthropocene and its rival -cenes; world literature and world-ecology; more broadly, the Environmental Humanities). Is there a role for a specifically postcolonial perspective in this panorama?

GH: Yes, the proliferation of '-isms' and '-cenes' can be very tedious, and I have a particular aversion to neologisms – why 'response-ability' rather than 'responsibility'? – which probably makes me seem like an old fogey at times. There are two basic issues that help account for this proliferation of paradigms, though in my recent work on conservation humanities I've proven myself as culpable as anyone. The first is the fetishization of the 'new' in academia under the conditions of neoliberalism (another 'ism'!); the second is that while both ecocriticism

and postcolonial studies pride themselves on being up to date, they (like academia in general) are always slightly behind the times.

LDC/SB: You have tackled the problem of interdisciplinarity in the past (especially for postcolonial studies), most notably in *Interdisciplinary Measures*. Has the situation changed since those earlier reflections? What is the role and the predicament of interdisciplinarity, especially for postcolonial and/or ecocritical research, in our current academic/intellectual scenario?

GH: I still see interdisciplinarity as a 'good thing', though it too has long since been institutionalized, and it's particularly annoying to see how university leaders look to capitalize on it without changing the disciplinary structures that they themselves have helped to set in place. Not that I necessarily endorse the move to a 'transdisciplinary' regime, and there will always be a place for individually driven, discipline-specific research. To me, the most important thing is that research be collaborative as well as individual, which means working outside of academia as well as within it. I can't understand why some academics shy away from this; it's much more fun to work on a project with others than to write a book by oneself.

LDC/SB: There is a lot of discussion about the genres of climate writing/art (for instance, Amitav Ghosh's realism vs. science fiction debate in *The Great Derangement*; Mark Bould's more inclusive idea of the Anthropocene Unconscious). Do you think some literary/artistic forms/genres are particularly suited to tackle our current climate predicament?

GH: I disagree with Ghosh: there are some realist novels I know that have plenty to say about climate change. The label 'cli fi' is part of the problem, I'd say, though I suppose there's no getting away from labels (even 'Anthropocene'!), just as there's no getting away from genres. All genres, and for that matter all forms of art, can potentially contribute to the climate debate, mainly by opening up different perspectives on it and by answering questions with other questions, which is what good art does.

LDC/SB: The postcolonial/environmental humanities discourse is predominantly anglophone. The necessary attention to indigenous knowledge promoted in the anglosphere arguably produces a paradoxical situation where we have a majority discourse hinged on postcolonial English countries and a minority discourse focused on the indigenous knowledges of these former colonies. How can we include other voices?

GH: A hardy perennial, this one! I have long supported, though have never been conscientious enough to perform, a multilingual as well as a multi-sited postcolonialism, and while I have some issues with Spivak, mainly because I'm never quite sure whether I've understood her, I completely agree with her that deep language learning is, or at least should be, an integral part

of engaging with the world. I also support (how could I not?) alternative knowledges to those of the West, the problem being that Western and non-Western knowledges are deeply entangled – the main issue I have with Mignolo and some of the other more extreme members of the 'decolonial' crowd. Indigenous perspectives are valuable (how could they not be?) but are hedged about with problems of who has the right to speak and who doesn't. The need to listen is just as important. I think Spivak is right about this as well: the important thing is to keep learning from others while recognizing that there's a crucial difference between, in her words, 'the limits of one's knowledge and the limits of what can be known'.

LDC/SB: Last but not least: where do you think we are going? What are in your opinion the most interesting directions?

GH: Are you talking about the world or the role that intellectuals (which, alas, has become something of a passé term) play in it? It's difficult to answer questions like this without sounding glib or pretentious. I do think the planet is in deep trouble (which is glib) and that intellectuals have a duty to point this out (which is pretentious). Ah, the holes we dig for ourselves! Perhaps one parting shot: the most interesting thing right now is certainly not the decolonization movement, necessary though it is, and I heartily dislike the pieties that surround it, especially those conducted in my own country in the name of the so-called culture wars. If we (whoever 'we' are) can talk about decolonization in non-reductive terms then all well and good, but an oppressive atmosphere of moralism hangs over it all. Academic research should only be as complicated as it needs to be, but it should always be suspicious of easy moralism. But there you go: I'm being moralistic myself.

To end on a more positive note, the marriage of postcolonialism and ecocriticism is likely to last and continues to produce all kinds of interesting offspring. My own interest at present is in what might broadly be called the poetics and politics of extinction: the different ways in which academics and practitioners alike respond to potentially irrecoverable losses of cultural as well as biological diversity in our troubled times. This is exciting work – and not always as dismal at it sounds!

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Decolonizing imperial epistemologies in African environmental historiography: chemical violence, postcoloniality and new narratives of the toxic epidemic in Africa

Elijah Doro

University of Agder

ABSTRACT

African history and environmental history have had negligible impact on each other. The field of environmental history has had limited traction in influencing the writing of African history and generating critical discourses that urgently frame the continent's postcolonial experiences beyond hegemonic and imperial epistemologies. Consequently, much of African environmental history research has struggled to appeal to postcolonial scholarship and provide relevant conceptual and methodological frameworks rooted in the objective imperatives of the present. This paper invites African environmental historians to generate urgent scholarship that concretely engages with postcolonial encounters and the contemporary manifestations of historical subaltern vulnerabilities. Through this, African environmental history research should seek to construct narratives that prompt the imperative for accountability, culpability, empowerment and the imagination of alternative ways of writing the past into the present. The paper appropriates and deploys slow "chemical violence" as a concept through which postcoloniality can be conscripted to construct new analytical and methodological pathways in the writing of African environmental history.

Keywords

Postcolonialism, slow violence, toxic, Africa, environmental history, wasteocene

Introduction

African environmental history literature has intently focused on the relationship between the colonial encounters and degraded environments, but very little of that research has emerged as the conceptual and analytical fulcrum for postcolonial scholarship (Stoler 2013, 10). A huge corpus of environmental history research has focused on the role of colonial scientists, colonial environmental knowledge and the technocratic order of colonial conservation and environmental governance (Beinart 2008; Grove 1996; Showers 2005; Tilley 2011). Subsequently, African environmental history became entrapped in the colonial complex and could not wander far out of this conceptual maze to address the legacies of empire and postcolonial situations. Much of this scholarship took for granted the colonial environmental regimes and failed to refocus on the interconnectedness between degraded environments and

decadent materialities of imperial projects and the many ways in which these continued to define contemporary spaces and landscapes in postcolonial Africa.

The colonial past and the postcolonial present are connected through material residues and debris that are indelibly etched on human bodies, cells of life and the physical natural infrastructure. The 'debris' of empire constitute the degraded humanity from colonial assault, the assailed and broken landscapes and the brutalized ecologies and the chemical sedimentation embedded in biological tissues that still confront and shape the politics of the present. Debris are the fragments of structural violence, the transgenerational shrapnel of chemical violence. Chemical violence in turn, is the disproportionate and devastating impact of environmental toxins on indigenous people, indigenous lands and their future generations (Loboiron 2021, 87). Like most forms of colonial violence, it is deliberate, systematic and systemic. It was based on a racialized denial of humanity for black people within a bifurcated colonial state consisting of citizens (white settlers) and subjects (Africans) (Mamdani 2006).

However, chemical violence as a distinct form of colonial encounter has received very limited attention from African environmental history literature. The focus has been on the more visible and well documented forms of structural violence such as land dispossession, natural resource extraction and displacement of indigenous communities and suppression of local knowledge systems. The emergence of "slow violence" (Nixon 2011) as an analytical tool for the environmental humanities to track temporalities of toxicities and their afterlives and the aftermaths of chemical violence has not stimulated as much critical discourses on the subject in Africa as it did in the global north. Slow violence refers to the gradual, dispersed and cumulative exposure to environmental toxins whose impact is not immediately quantifiable but manifests subtly across many generations in many forms as afterlives. The many ways and forms in which these toxic afterlives crossed temporal boundaries of the colonial past to be activated in the postcolonial present has received very little if any systematic historiographical attention in Africa.

This scholarly neglect and negligence could be explained by two factors: the unavailability of tangible evidence in the colonial archive that concretely documents the perpetration of chemical violence, and the deliberate invisibilisation and casualization of chemical exposure and chemical death of disposable "native" bodies. The disposability of colonial subjects routinised chemical genocides and the construction of the native body as less than human in settler imaginaries reified and legitimated colonial structural violence (King 2019, Belcourt 2015, Belcourt 2020, Boisseron 2018, Kim 2017). Colonial epistemologies and scientific knowledge concealed the chemical violence and its disproportionately devastating impact on indigenous people and future generations. This lacuna has been reproduced in much of African environmental history scholarship and the chemical violence of colonial rule is entombed and occluded, yet its toxic potency festers and lurks in contemporary communities.

This paper engages this historiographical void and discusses conceptual pathways for reframing African environmental history within postcolonial studies and recentering the focus towards integrating the colonial past and the imperial presence. Postcolonialism subsumes temporalities of beginnings and end into continuities and complexities of historical and chronological thinking (Prakash 1996, 188). It emphasizes the interconnectedness, fluidity and continuities between past and present, colonial and postcolonial, north and south. However, formative postcolonial theory came under a lot of criticism for being too theoretical, more textual and less engaged with the contemporary realities and conditions of social and economic suffering (Dirlik 1994; William 1997; Callincos 1995). Postcolonial revisionist scholarship has emphasized more constructive integration of postcolonial approaches to African Studies in ways that furthers epistemology and methodology (Abrahamsen 2003). Also, postcolonial studies have a penchant to morph into alibi narratives if they are not placed within adequate frameworks of analysis (Spivak 1999, 1). This is quite common when the representation of the colonized and colonies (re)produces postcolonial knowledge that securely places colonialism/imperialism in the past.

In line with these critiques of postcolonial theories, this paper draws on the concept of chemical violence to engage with temporalities of toxicities in a broader postcolonial analytical framework that juxtaposes contemporaneity and historicity as immediate and urgent ontologies that require address and redress. The paper provokes new methodological and proactive conceptual approaches for the writing of urgent and relevant environmental histories that are pertinent to the challenges and subjective experiences of postcolonial African communities. The paper calls for decolonial oriented methodologies of writing African environmental history that transcends the limitations imposed by colonial sources and to coopt our sensorial perceptions and bodily experiences with contemporary landscapes and communities and showing how residues of the past have a preponderance as toxic legacies of chemical violence. It argues for narratives of historical and environmental knowledge that fosters empowerment of subalterns, prompts the quest for accountability, and challenges the culture of impunity and contest hegemonic discourses that entrench the pervasive culture of environmental violence in Africa. Consequently, the paper connects with the broader environmental humanities literature that has urged the discipline to recentre itself as a knowledge regime and medium through which scientific facts are translated into ‘politically realizable’ policy decisions (Sörlin and Warde 2007).

Colonial chemical violence, toxic temporalities and postcolonial susceptibilities in Africa

The 19th century in Europe was dubbed the “arsenic century”, a unique poison epoch that has been subject to much scrutiny by medical historians and social historians (Wharton 2011;

Parascandola 2012). While the European poison century and the concomitant chemical violence has received widespread attention, the colonies and Africa's globalization and integration into the poison empires is under researched (Arnold 2016). This negligence inadvertently conceals the multiple layers of slow violence and scuttles the quest for historical accountability and culpability. The case of Vietnam and the use of Agent Orange poison illustrates how neglect, strategic suppression of information, erasure and the invisibilisation of victims of chemical violence can be deployed to construct plausible deniability by the perpetrators (Adelson and Taverna 2021). Thus, historical narratives that can excavate the multi-layered temporalities of toxicities and connect them to contemporary human susceptibilities and vulnerabilities in Africa are an essential brand of critical and analytical postcolonial scholarship that will empower communities and prompt remedial action.

African communities were conscripted into the poison empires by colonial capitalist enterprise from approximately around the late 19th century to the early 20th century. Expansion of European colonial settlements into the hinterlands instrumentalized poisons to contain pests and diseases. Poisons were used to tame the 'wilderness' and rid it of vermin and species of flora and fauna deemed undesirable and invasive for white settler colonial projects (Mavhunga 2011). Also, colonial agricultural expansion relied on pesticides, herbicides and fungicides. Furthermore, mineral extraction, metallurgy and industrial processes in colonial Africa generated toxic waste that was deposited on landscapes and biological bodies. For instance, during the first decade of the 20th century, drums of arsenic poison were imported into eastern Africa for the booming colonial export leather industry and the toxic waste was washed down rivers poisoning water and the land (Sunseri 2018). Additionally, bio-medical research for tropical diseases' control used African bodies as test subjects (Bonhome 2020). The regimes of political entomology constructed for colonial pest and disease control mobilized massive compulsory pest eradication campaigns that coercively recruited African labour to conduct the toxic sprays under dangerous conditions (Scoones 2014; Doro and Swart 2019; Brown 2003; Uledi and Hove 2019; Howards 1907). In most colonies, pest control was enforced by ordinances and legislation that empowered the white settler state to use chemicals without restraint and to compulsorily enforce pest destruction campaigns in African areas (Mwatwara 2014; Gilfoyle 2003; Peloquin 2013). Colonial mining technologies also employed extractive technologies that exposed millions to slow chemical violence, disease and death while simultaneously chemicalizing landscapes with persistent and non-biodegradable toxins such as lead and arsenic (Pesa 2022).

This chemical avalanche did not expire with the end of formal empire but endured in many protracted forms as "toxic timescapes of colonialism" and "subaltern timescapes of contamination" (Wright 2023, 173; Ferdinand 2023; Davies 2023; Ilengo and Armiero 2023, 188). Toxic residues crossed the temporal boundaries and etched themselves into soils, water,

genetic material and biological cells of life unleashing a subtle but deadly spiral of chemical violence and an epidemic of disease. Toxicities, poisonous chemicals, and toxic exposure manifests in different time scales and generations of the human life cycle (Müller and Nielsen, 2023). Armiero (2021) designated the current global epoch as the 'wasteocene', warranted by the distinct preponderance of toxic waste, wasted relationships, wasted people and wasted ecologies generated by colonial capitalist production. In Zambia, the colonial mining and smelting industry bequeathed the legacy of lead poisoning of children from the toxic soils resulting in brain damage, paralysis and blindness (Carrington 2017). In South Africa, the profligacy of the colonial gold mining establishment left behind toxic tailing storage facilities and problems of acid mine drainage that threaten water supplies and the health and well-being of marginalised black communities (Olalde 2015; Chetty, Pillay and Humphries 2021). Toxic waste from historic gold mines constitutes the single largest threat to contemporary South Africa's water resources and human health (Durand 2012). An insidious and underdiagnosed Silicosis and Tuberculosis (TB) epidemic generated by the colonial gold mines has also had far reaching deleterious effects on public health and livelihoods in postcolonial communities in southern Africa (McCulloch 2009; McCulloch 2013; Marks 2006; Trapido et al 1998).

Arsenic poisoning from historic mines and dipping sites contaminates underground water supplies and threaten human and animal health (Ramudzuli 2021). In Burkina Faso and Ghana, the arsenic concentration of ground water supplies in gold mining areas is high resulting in skin disorders, keratosis, melanosis and skin tumours (Smedley 2006; Smedley and Kinniburgh 2002). Residues of chemical and bacteriological weapons used against black nationalist movements by colonial regimes such as anthrax, XV, sarin, mustard gas, parathion, thallium, strychnine, arsenic and cyanide have embedded into human bodies and landscapes (Coovadia 2021; Martinez 2003; Cross 2017). A clandestine government's bio-chemical weapons program in colonial Zimbabwe during the 1970s resulted in the largest outbreak of anthrax disease in modern history in 1980 that left more than 180 people dead (Coen 2009). Anthrax has remained enzootic in the country and outbreaks have occurred sporadically.[1]

Therefore, the imperative for more robust multidisciplinary studies of toxic historical landscapes in Africa and the extent to which they impact present communities is urgent. Similar studies in North America have not only unearthed the pervasive contamination of soils and water sources by toxins such as arsenic from historical gold mining sites but prompted environmental clean-up programs (Sandlos et al. 2019).[2] To this end, inter-disciplinary research that integrates environmental history methods and fields of environmental and medical sciences such as ecotoxicology, environmental forensics, environmental chemistry and epidemiological studies are imperative for a much robust engagement with how colonial chemical violence still alters life forms and its toxic postcolonial manifestations (Worster 1996). Thus, environmental history scholarship in Africa requires significant postcolonial vindication

and utility in how it can produce relevant knowledge that works and empowers communities in dismantling structural vulnerabilities and susceptibilities that entrap them. It must deconstruct "ignorance" of toxic legacies, disrupt hegemonies and systemic processes that entrench vulnerabilities and chemically compromise subaltern bodies. It must be strategically deployed to conscientize present and future generations about the toxic hazards that stalk them. Environmental historians must engage the pervasive corrosive processes of colonial regimes and ruination and how these weighed in the past, weigh in the present and will weigh in the future. Tracking the "shifting patches of ruination" (Tsing 2015, 206) is an endeavor that could afford a vantage epistemological gaze.

Postcolonial and decolonial methodologies for examining chemical violence in Africa

The terrains of chemical violence are occluded, opaque and without immediate physical and concrete evidence that can be urgently presented as proof. The tangibilities or the substantial and perceptible material of bodies are not always available to demonstrate culpability and enforce historical accountability. Tangible bodies are the currency that purchase attention, empathy and sympathy to endorse or legitimize narratives. Tangible bodies serialize and memorialize the commission of violence, and without bodies to display for spectacle and legitimation, history often acquits and absolves. In the absence of tangible materialities the historical plot recedes into the classic murder mystery conundrum of "no body, no crime." This is the methodological and conceptual enigma that makes the investigation of chemical violence in Africa and the colonies more intractable. Chemical violence is obscured within 'epistemic violence', a systematic obliteration of the traces of the 'other' and its concomitant precarious subjectivities (Spivak 1999, 266). Stefania Barca (2014, 542) refers to this epistemic obliteration as "narrative violence." Colonial toxic narratives are engineered and domesticated to either conceal and obliterate subaltern victims from collective memory or manage the emotional responses and public sentiments (Armiero 2021). The colonial archive is hostile and indifferent to the experiences of marginalized subjects and much of colonial scientific knowledge and technical expertise was not always competent (Saha 2022, 2; Showers 1989). The discernment of chemical violence and the quantification of its severity and costs across time is thus problematic. Also, marginalized groups are often invisible in official memory and policy planning where their chemical exposure and chemical death is framed either as "accidental" or "ordinary" (Davis 1995). Hegemonic toxic narratives conceal the victims from view and expunge them from mordenity, invisibilise the violence and normalize the injustice (Armiero: 2021, 19; Barca 2020).

How then do we frame effective and urgent histories from the disparate fragments of colonial sources constructed to suppress and enforce rigid denialist ontologies on culpability

and responsibility for pollution and chemical exposure? The models developed for constructing scientific knowledge on toxicology, pollution and contamination during much of the 20th century were based on threshold theories of harm, 'assimilative capacity' and the body-centric logic (Nash 2006; Loboiron 2021). Assimilative capacity implied the maximum limit to which a body could be exposed to pollution without succumbing to physical harm. These techno-scientific regimes codified in official colonial techno-scientific thought espoused visible and quantifiable bodily harm and threshold limit values as sole admissible evidence of poisoning. Subsequently, much of scientific research on chemical contamination and pollution conducted by public and private entities documented the toxic risks in ameliorated and mitigated terms such that much of the damage escaped institutional scrutiny across many decades (Pesa 2022). Thus, human bodies / animal bodies that could not be urgently quantified under the threshold regimes' gaze are invisible from the official count. Critical decolonial discourses have contested these colonial body-centric and threshold value theories, but they are yet to find methodological and conceptual articulation in the body of current African environmental history scholarship. Murphy (2017) calls for critical discourses that illuminate the expansive and intrusive chemical relations of capitalism that entangles life forms to create chemically altered and reconstituted lives, or what she calls the 'alterlives'. The afterlives of empire's chemical violence in Africa are not only aftermaths, but what I prefer to refer to as 'alterments', chemically altered moments in which biological life and livelihoods are conditioned to stunt and despair. It is a form of subtle structural violence that cause harm to people in a way that constrains and deprives them from their potential quality of life (Liboiron 2021, 87).

These entombed subaltern toxic experiences must be framed urgently and with an immediacy that conveys meaning and lived experience. Our methodologies must be able to conjure and make sensorially available all the encounters ostracized and censored by the colonial archives. Other sensory methods of historical reconstruction can be useful to discern latent forms of violence that are not immediately accessible through sight. Both Hunt (2013) and Azoulay (2013) emphasized the urgency to appropriate other sensory techniques such as hearing and listening for images and sounds in the eye of memory while reading the colonial archive or working in terrains without physical evidence to discern the invisible forms of violence. Thus, embodiment of other senses such as the imagination can be used to discern the weak traces in the archival sources and create alternative narratives that produce meaning through reenacting in our minds the experiences of the past (Chakrabarty 2009). A vicarious imaginative approach towards the writing of environmental history involves using the limited fragments in archival sources to recreate alternate scenarios and simulate the multiple possibilities to recreate and reenact suppressed experiences that are not presented in the sources. It is a logical and deductive process of parsing the archive for traces of chemical exposure that are implicitly or inadvertently referenced and intricately linking these in a

narrative thread that demonstrates the scale and extent of impact to humans and dramatizes vividly how chemical death was administered. Subsequently, the absence of concrete sources that directly show the perpetration of chemical violence in scientifically verifiable and quantitative terms should not distract the writing of histories of colonial chemical violence, rather it should open pathways for new ways of thinking and imagining the quantification of this type of violence so that it is not buried and forgotten due to lack of evidence.

Ironically, the proof technicality has been deployed consistently to deny culpability by those who deliberately and systematically suppressed the evidence that could constitute the proof through either manipulated scientific and expert knowledge, destruction of records or censorship. However, chemical relations and the trail that connect entities and bodies to each other cannot be erased and if these can be established, visualised, reenacted and visibilised from the colonial archive then a strong case of chemical violence can be made. Bodies can be deployed as powerful sensorial windows into expunged toxic experiences and be used vicariously, viscerally and corporeally to reconstruct the invisibilised encounters of chemical violence. Consequently, overwhelming evidence is not required to constitute the basis of credible narratives of chemical violence. If we can sensorially demonstrate embodied experiences of disproportionate exposure, then we have established the chief premises for chemical violence and our analytical focus must shift to other parameters such as enforcing accountability, culpability, contesting cultures of impunity, empowering affected communities and remedying the toxicities lodged in bodies and landscapes. To this end, historical studies of generations and toxic timescapes can also provide a useful conceptual perspective on the global fight against the toxic epidemic (Müller and Nilsen 2023, 27). It is an approach against erasure, strategic historical amnesia, colonial marginalization and the transgenerational stratification of alterlives and alterments. It would “reanimate arrested histories” and provoke a critical rethink of empire and its place beyond the epistemological domains of coloniality. To posit empire in post coloniality is to give it relevance and purpose in the construction of the present not in a fatalistic way, but in a manner that challenges its perpetuation and entrenchment in people’s lives.

It must be emphasized, however, that while the colonial archive is a major repository of historical data that can be used for the reconstruction of experiences of slow chemical violence in Africa, there are many other alternative sources from which these experiences can be more objectively gleaned. Our attention must focus on oral histories, stories and narratives from below that document personal lived experiences in toxic environments and how individuals have made sense of their respective vulnerabilities to diseases and chemical exposure across time. Toxic biographies and ‘guerilla narratives’, as Armiero (2021) calls them, can constitute a new social archive that can afford a much exhaustive and extensive gaze on the conditions, nature and extent of chemical violence. Other alternative sources could include literary

material, fiction, historical documentaries and films that have portrayed some of the atrocities perpetrated on indigenous populations in Africa during colonial rule.[3]

In all these reconstructive endeavors, the motif of urgency and immediacy must be emphasized to reinforce the pervasive precarity that stalks postcolonial life systems within chemicalized landscapes and toxic relationships of production, subsistence and existence. The deadly encounters in colonial pasts should be presented in ways that evokes and prompts proactive engagement with the colonial presence. Beyond its perpetuation as molecular and toxic cellular material much of the toxic legacies endure within the infrastructure of colonial chemical violence that still abounds in many imperial forms. The imperial formations are the power relationships underlying exposure, marginalization, visibility and disposability. The infrastructure is the more enduring socio-economic and political cultures that dispense chemical violence in the present and these entities must not be underestimated. The colonial matrix of power relations manifests themselves in the present day in multifaceted forms that wreak havoc on postcolonial Africa, preventing economic development and unleashing epistemic violence (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013, ix). Forms of colonial labour regimes, racialized exposure, expendability of non-white bodies, suppression of knowledge, construction of ignorance, misinformation/green washing, genocide, denial of responsibility and the rapacious culture of impunity still endure. The hierarchical, racialized and hegemonic structures of empire still abound. Thus, engaging with these entities is critical towards extending the frontiers of postcolonial epistemologies in African environmental history.

The new disciplinary frontier in African environmental history

I posit that postcoloniality in African environmental history should not seek economic restitutions, reparations, historical pity, collective guilt or commiserations. It is not an epistemic indictment or a discourse of vengeance. Postcoloniality is a quest for historical accountability, culpability and empowerment of the marginalized subalterns through new forms of knowledge that dismantle toxic hegemonic propaganda that entrenches susceptibilities and vulnerabilities built across centuries of colonial relations. Postcolonialism's identity should be its political commitment to the marginalized and recovering the subject position of the subalterns (Appiah, 1991). The epistemological objective of postcolonial discourses must not just end with knowing or knowledge production, but appropriate new knowledge into processes of action and doing things. To know is not enough, people must be empowered to understand and act. Postcolonial theory must be underlined by postcolonial activism and political action to address the concrete and fundamental questions of human survival and the future. As Mudimbe (1988, 188) puts it, history must function as both "a discourse of knowledge and a discourse of power." Therefore, toxic legacies, chemical violence and the toxic epidemic must constitute a new frontier in analytical postcolonial African environmental history scholarship.

The relationships of "wasting away" that produces wasted people still lie at the core of the global capitalist economy and its neocolonial order, where peripheries constitute geographic zones for disposing hazardous chemicals and toxic waste (Müller, 2019). Global environmental governance, despite its "green" platitudes, has remained detached from this toxic threat and the accompanying chemical violence to communities in the Global South.[4] The agenda and focus has been on the "climate crisis" and cutting carbon emissions to the detriment of the toxic epidemic. The toxic epidemic is perhaps the most neglected but most insidious and fatal catastrophe confronting Africa and the Global South during the last and this century. However, according to United Nations figures toxic contamination is the single largest cause of premature death in the world, and if we factor the scales of disproportionality of exposure and institutionalized toxic global relations it is common knowledge where most of these deaths occur (Bergman et al 2013). The historical and institutionalized disruption of knowledge, memories and narratives of invisibilisation has distorted contemporary understanding of toxicities, their legacies and the many new forms in which chemical violence is foisted upon oblivious communities under new postcolonial banners and development-oriented green rhetoric.

Dismantling the toxic hegemonies and its attendant infrastructure of slow violence requires new epistemic approaches that are framed to resist, empower, bring to account and structure a new disciplinary outlook that generates relevant knowledge for the grassroots and subalterns. The merits of these new approaches are that they must be rooted in concrete human experiences and framed to respond to conditions that threaten human survival — particularly the survival of the historically marginalized and those made invisible by dominant global hegemonies. This is "activist scholarship" and part of the movement of resistance against the "wasteocene logic" and its perpetuation of ruination, othering and wasting away that Marco Armiero proposes. African environmental history discourses must assume the liberation mantle, and dismantle the core logic of western modernity (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013, 4). A new historiographical frontier must mobilize, energize, galvanize and activate the capacity to imagine new communities and contest the inherent structural violence in all its forms. For that to happen, African environmental history must find traction in postcolonial African scholarship and establish empirical grounding as a proactive and relevant discipline. It must produce and communicate discourses that engage and are relevant to the concrete social and economic miseries of the subalterns. Environmental history has the potential to wield influence that can transcend the narrow disciplinary confines into realms of policy making and informing public opinion.

Notes

[1] See https://dailynewsegypt.com/2020/01/14/at-least-31-zimbabweans-affected-by-anthrax/, accessed March 11, 2023, and https://mg.co.za/article/2000-12-18-zimbabwe-on-brink-of-anthrax-epidemic/, accessed March 11, 2023.
[2] The toxic legacies project in Canada examines the history and legacy of arsenic contamination at Giant mine and engages local communities in the affected areas. The project also includes a major federal remediation project. See http://www.toxiclegacies.com/project/the-yellowknives-dene-and-arsenic/. Accessed on May 9, 2023.
[3] See the colonial films website that contains hundreds of documentaries on life in the British colonies available at http://www.colonialfilm.org.uk.
[4] The export of hazardous chemicals banned for use in the global north to Africa and the Global South constitutes one of the major aspects of chemical violence that appears legitimized and condoned. During 2018 and 2019 the United Kingdom and the European Union approved the export of 141,000 tons of pesticides banned for use in Europe (because of negative health effects) to Africa. See Kairu 2022.

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Elijah Doro is a research fellow at University of Agder and part of the team working on the research project *Deadly Dreams: A Cultural History of Poisons*. He is an environmental historian and author of *Plunder for Profit: A Socio-environmental History of Tobacco Farming in Southern Rhodesia and Zimbabwe*. He has an active interest in toxic histories and narratives of chemical violence in Africa. E-mail: elijahdoro0@gmail.com; elijah.doro@uia.no

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Can nature speak? A peasant perspective on decolonizing the human-nature relationship through multispecies communication[1]

Sophie von Redecker

Faculty of Organic Agricultural Sciences, University of Kassel, Germany

Christian Herzig

Centre for Sustainable Food Systems, Justus Liebig University Giessen, Germany

ABSTRACT

In our article, we examine the hegemonic human-nature relationship through a postcolonial lens. Our inquiry starts from the assumption that the human-nature relationship needs to be reworked in order to find better ways to respond to the climate crisis and ecological devastation. By radically questioning the current human-nature relationship, we challenge hegemonic understandings of 'human' and 'nature' and call for thinking *with* rather than about 'nature'. We take our cue from Gayatri Spivak's "Can the subaltern speak?" and ask the question: "Can nature speak?" We outline how 'nature' is understood as the voiceless 'other,' and is continuously silenced through misleading representations. Thus, hegemonic discourses on climate change are revealed to be intertwined with colonial continuities and epistemological violations, which we examine through indigenous and decolonial approaches as well as the statements of five Baltimore farmers, who were our interlocutors during a research stay. We focus on existing alternatives – especially from agricultural contexts – in which 'nature' is not understood as an "it" (Kimmerer 2017). We ask what potential for change might lie in communication with 'nature', since the etymology of the word (Lat. *communicare*) leads to worlds of co-becoming and sharing. In sum, we follow calls for epistemological and ontological shifts that not only challenge hegemonic discourses on climate change, but also decolonize hegemonic ways of researching, (academic) thinking and understandings of 'the other'.

Keywords
human-nature relationship, othering of nature, decolonial listening, communication, care, silencing

Prologue / *Mistica*

Does soil speak? Does the soil communicate with you?

Amelia Hazen: "The soil speaks through the plants that grow in it and the organisms living within. A healthy soil is visibly lively."

Jesse Bloom: "Of course. It doesn't use human language, but it can tell all sorts of stories about where it's been, how it's feeling, and of course we can always talk about the weather."

Rodette Jones: “Yes, it does speak, it shows by producing or not producing according to how you care for it.”
Allison Worman: “Totally! It speaks as it is and from what it bears. It communicates through action, growth, texture.”
Elisa Lane: “Soil does speak but it takes time to understand its language. I’m still learning.”

In the peasant movement La Via Campesina, which comprises 200 million people across the world and constitutes the biggest global social movement, each meeting starts with a *mistica*, an artistic prologue, which introduces the topic of the day or focuses on a special theme (La Via Campesina 2022). In line with that, we began this article with the statements of five Baltimore farmers, who answered the question, “Can soil speak? Does the soil communicate with you?” – as part of longer interviews which we conducted during a research stay in Baltimore, US. Very much in line with what we will argue later, the *mistica* is understood as “a Cosmovision, not an anthropocentric understanding” (La Via Campesina 2022), and focuses on the peasant relationship with the land. We read these statements as grounded and comprehensive engagements with the human-nature relationship, as counternarratives to hegemonic conceptions of this relationship, as poetic and political. We will draw on these statements in our analysis. They can be seen as seeds for further thinking, as a rich soil in which old assumptions can be composted, in a decolonial un/learning, and new aggregates are assembled to prepare blossoms yet unknown.

They underline that this article is written first and foremost from a farming perspective.[2]

Introduction

“What do you hear the earth saying to humans at this time?” Author, farmer, and activist Leah Penniman puts this question to 38 of the most respected Black environmentalists in her recent book *Black Earth Wisdom* (Penniman 2023). Their different answers are not only eloquently beautiful and rich, but weave together the most pressing socioecological questions and problems of our times. What is more, none of them have any doubt that ‘nature’ is saying something.[3]

In a similar vein, Naomi Klein begins her *Climate against Capitalism* (2015, 29) with a quotation from Victor Hugo: “How sad to think that nature speaks and mankind doesn’t listen.” And, on the evening before the UN Climate Summit in 2014, Oscar-winning documentarian Louie Psihoyos projected onto the UN headquarters in New York “the whole world is singing but we’ve stopped listening” (Bubnoff 2015).

These three examples and the farmers’ statements in the prologue confront one of the most essential components of human exceptionalism: humans’ ability to speak. In the

Environmental Humanities, human exceptionalism, anthropocentric worldviews and the mastery of 'nature' by 'humans' are recognized as pressing problems that contribute to the devastation of 'nature' (Rose *et al.* 2012; Plumwood 2002). At the same time, anthropocentric logics as well as nature devastation are intertwined with colonial exploitation and hegemonic Western ways of thinking (rooted in Enlightenment ideas) which foster the denial of nature's agency (Braidotti 2003; Bennett 2010; DeLoughrey and Handley 2011; Rose et al. 2012, Plumwood 2002). Gayatri Spivak encapsulated this in a talk in 2015: "All exploitation started with the exploitation of 'nature'" (Spivak 2015). Similarly, Leah Penniman writes: "It stands to reason that any hope of solving the environmental crisis will require an examination and uprooting of the white supremacist ideologies that underpin the crisis" (2023, xx).

This article will look at one of these fundamental underpinnings by exploring the question "Can nature speak?", building on Gayatri Spivak's famous intervention "Can the subaltern speak?". Our approach is based on the assumption that the ecological crisis is a crisis of the human-nature relationship (Becker and Jahn 2006), and that we must examine this relationship if we want to strive for much needed ecological change. We see the current global situation, which Brand (2009) has defined as a "multiple crisis" combining many dimensions, as a socioecological emergency, and thus understand 'human' and 'nature' as intertwined in "naturecultural" entanglements (Haraway 2016). This means two things: first, that even though we are searching for less exploitative ways to live with the more-than-human and mainly focus on the 'ecological', this may involve fewer oppressions within the sphere of the so-called 'human', since the exploitation of so-called natural resources plays a central role in any imperial project (DeLoughrey and Handley 2011, 10) and thus involves violence against 'humans' and 'nature' alike. Secondly, we neither understand 'the human' nor 'nature' within the term human-nature-relationship as solid, complete, or able to be globally defined. Instead, the investigation of the human-nature relationship will overcome certain hegemonic understandings of these two fields and strives for more nuanced and suitable framings of both, as well as of the interstices between and entanglements of 'human' and 'nature.' The interstitial spaces represented by the hyphen highlight the actual field of encounters, which is especially important when it comes to the ability to speak. Communication, listening and response-ability (Haraway 2016) take place in the space embodied by the hyphen.

In sum, our approach can be understood in the context of claims that underline the misleading ways in which the 'ecological' crisis has been researched so far. Meanwhile, Kathryn Yusoff (in Gabrys et al. 2020) criticizes climate science for being obsessed with generating numbers without doing anything to initiate much needed radical change. We follow this call for change, approaching the climate crisis on an epistemological and ontological level.

As the farmers' statements in the prologue underline, less hierarchical and less anthropocentric human-nature encounters do take place and are – especially in non-Western contexts – more than just an imaginary future or an academic idea of ontological turns (Todd 2016). Therefore, our analysis will draw on indigenous and decolonial approaches as well as Western philosophies and theories which decenter the human, critically address the genealogy of epistemological exploitation stabilized through colonial and enlightenment myths, and thereby try to find counterhegemonic conceptions of 'the human' and 'nature'. The theories and approaches we use cross North/South boundaries, since "the solution is not to eliminate the difference but to decolonize the logic of coloniality that translated differences into values" (Mignolo 2011, xxvii). None of these contexts are homogenous: "What is usually called Western modernity is a very complex set of phenomena in which dominant and subaltern perspectives coexist," while indigenous approaches or *Epistemologies from the South* differ in themselves (de Sousa Santos 2015, x). That said, this article is not a further attempt to argue for another ontology (Todd 2016). It is concerned with lived experiences which are there, present and vibrant, but silenced, and it is therefore much more about listening than about writing. In line with Carla Hustak and Natasha Myers, it is about "reading with our senses attuned to stories told in otherwise muted registers" (2012, 77).

We will begin by conducting a postcolonial reading of the hegemonic human-nature relationship. Then, in a decolonial and multispecies approach, we will reconsider our postcolonial insights. In the first part, we will discuss the othering of 'nature' and, second, the representation of 'nature' in hegemonic climate change discourses. While, with the second, we echo precisely Spivak's point of critique, namely the powerful silencing through representation, the focus on othering also follows important lines of postcolonial inquiry.

By briefly analysing the binary thinking behind the notions of 'human' and 'nature', we do not want to reproduce these ways of thinking but would like to show the fractures, the instability, the rickety construction of these hegemonic interpretations. We understand postcolonial theory here as a lens to show the continuations of colonialism and we use decolonial approaches to focus on ways of unlearning these.

Therefore, we will reconsider our insights from the postcolonial reading through multispecies or more-than-human perspectives to come closer to a decolonial unlearning and turn to counterhegemonic perceptions of the human-nature relationship by focusing on contexts, ontologies, epistemologies and place-bound practices in which the ability of 'nature' to speak is existent, perceived, influential and, above all, unquestioned. By investigating the question "Can nature speak?", we will overcome hegemonic understandings of 'the other' and focus on the entanglement of and communication between 'humans' and 'nature' in certain places at certain moments.

Our investigation of the human-nature relationship is written from an agricultural and farming perspective – a field that is highly entangled with (drivers of) colonial exploitation and thus should not remain purely a natural science but open up to the humanities. On the other hand, counterhegemonic farming practices and agricultural genealogies offer tools to overcome exploitative ways of encountering 'nature' (Redecker and Herzig 2020) and can thus assist the humanities in solving questions regarding 'the environment'.

Nature othering

"We're still largely trapped inside the enlightenment tale of progress as human control over a passive and 'dead' nature that justifies both colonial conquests and commodity economies" (Plumwood 2002).

In the Western discourse on 'nature', the man of reason endowed with logos (Braidotti 2013) was constructed in opposition to irrational 'nature', which was wild, deterministic, passive, and above all unable to speak. According to Val Plumwood (2009, 118), "Human/nature dualism conceives the human as not only superior to but as different in kind from the non-human, which is conceived as a lower non-conscious and non-communicative purely physical sphere that exists as a mere resource or instrument for the higher human one." To put it in postcolonial terms, 'nature' is conceptualized as the completely 'other', as the counter-image, which must be clearly distinguished from 'the human'. Such demarcation stabilizes the construction of 'the human', as described in the context of othering processes between 'humans' by Edward Said, who explains in *Orientalism* (1979) how colonial discourse produces colonized subjects and colonizers alike.

Building on Stuart Hall's critique in *The West and the Rest* of a discourse that "constructs an over-simplified conception of 'difference'" (Hall 1992, 189), we could say that categorizing 'humans' as distinct from 'nature' not only obscures relatively recognizable power relations and lines of difference such as gender, ethnicity, sexuality, or class, and forcibly unifies them, but also overlooks the multiplicity of subtler distinctions and intersectional links within human distinctness.[4] Likewise, on the side of 'nature,' phenomena, things, and organisms are thrown together which take the most diverse forms imaginable. Most diverse (life) forms and 'species' outside of human society are thus unified and made invisible. Additionally, such a binary pair leads to the assumption that there are only 'humans' and 'nature' and nothing in between, nothing entangled or interwoven, no continuum, no overlappings and no exchange.

The continuation of 'nature's' othering has also been highlighted by de Sousa Santos et al. (2007, xxxv). They state that the resilient subaltern figure of nature is still with us. Through the established dualisms of nature/culture, human/nature and the associated attributions, 'nature' remains 'the other' and does not get a voice itself. As the current debate on climate

change shows, even in the current recognition of so-called 'environmental' problems and the much invoked urgent need to protect 'nature,' power relations remain, as Farhana Sultana elaborates in her analysis of what she calls "Climate coloniality" (2022, 7). She calls for human/nonhuman relationships to be reworked while valuing Indigenous and traditional knowledge and sciences worldwide (Sultana 2022, 7). Like Escobar, she challenges epistemic coloniality and calls for epistemological and ontological shifts that foster pluriversality instead (2020, 8). Meanwhile, Jane Bennett in *Vibrant Matter* (2010) addresses the fatality of the dualism from the perspective of New Materialism. She notes that earth-destroying fantasies of consumption and exploitation are fed precisely by the fact that the material is regarded as dead, without a will of its own (Bennett 2010, ix), and thus represents 'the other' par excellence.

In sum, a counterimage to the hegemonic human-nature relationship, to 'nature' as 'the other' is one approach to initiating a radical shift in the climate change discourse.

Nature's representation

"No one asked plants, 'What can you tell us?'" (Kimmerer 2013, 42)

In climate change discourses, 'nature' as 'the other' is negotiated by 'humans', who decide what should happen to it. Even after the recognition that 'nature' is to be protected – perhaps most popularly communicated through the paradigm of conservation – the silencing of 'nature' remains, since it continues to be treated as an object of negotiations.

Robin Wall Kimmerer (2017) calls attention to these (post)colonial continuities: "Beyond the renaming of places, I think the most profound act of linguistic imperialism was the replacement of a language of animacy with one of objectification of nature, which renders the beloved land as lifeless object." Kimmerer shows that it is not just a matter of speaking differently about 'nature', but of understanding it as alive, and thus communicating with it rather than about it. Similarly, Said explains in reference to "the Orient" that it is not perceived as an equal interlocutor within imperial discourse, but rather as the 'silent Other' (Said 1985, 17).

In texts and statements describing climate change and thus the urgent need to alter something about the way 'nature' is treated, 'nature' itself is rarely given a voice. Even the founding document of so-called sustainability, the Brundtland Report, focuses on economic reorientation (Hauff 1987). Climate conference agreements have rarely involved listening to 'nature' itself.[5] Even critical reporting rarely incorporates 'nature's' needs. Articles accompanying the climate conferences focus on actors such as the Pope, the Chinese and American presidents, BP, Shell, managers and multinationals, their needs and their (possible) capacity to act (Hecking 2015). 'Nature,' represented by melting glaciers, an "island that will soon no

longer exist" or "storms, drought, floods," on the other hand, is only thematized as a victim or a threat (Hecking 2015).

However, as Sultana proposes, decolonizing the climate change discourse is not only about "having a seat at the table (e.g., participation at the COP26) but determining what the table is" (2022, 9). As long as the Western notion of one homogenous 'nature' (that is, 'the other' in relation to 'humans') is upheld, a decolonization of the climate change discourse will not be achieved. Maria do Mar Castro Varela and Nikita Dhawan, referring to Said's remarks, point out that the texts of the so-called Orientalists are accorded a much higher status than the "objects" they speak about (Castro Varela and Dhawan 2015, 102). Something similar happens in negotiations over 'nature': it is obscured precisely by representations – because "scientists decided long ago that plants were deaf and mute, locked in isolation without communication'' (Kimmerer 2013, 19).

Thus, in addition to the obvious material aspects of colonial domination, the violent power of representation, which is also central to postcolonial inquiry, is hegemonically perpetuated in relation to 'nature'. When Miriam Nandi states that postcolonial theory clearly sides with the disenfranchised, or those whom Frantz Fanon called "the wretched of the earth" (Nandi 2006, 123), 'nature' ought to be included in these considerations, since it is not granted its own agency, rights, or voice.

We do not merely want to recognize that the othering and representation of 'nature,' the epistemological part of climate colonialism, needs to be reworked, but in the following explore the frictions in which other understandings and many diverse and situated human-nature relationships are flourishing.

Can nature speak?

"The forest is always talking [...]" (Toi Scott in Penniman 2023, 39)

As has often been quoted and critically discussed, Spivak responded in the negative to her question "Can the subaltern speak?" (1988). No, the subaltern cannot speak. Both Indian men and English colonists speak for or about Indian women in ways that silence them.

Our postcolonial analysis above on the othering and representation of 'nature' in climate change discourse similarly forces us, for the moment, to answer the question "Can nature speak?" with 'no.'

Another reason why we are currently compelled to answer the question "Can nature speak?" in the negative is that the very definition of language implies that it is a human capacity and that this capacity, in line with the human othering discussed above, distinguishes humans from all 'the others' (Glock 2015, 327).

Such othering is not a naïve process but an active violence, as Kimmerer shows, describing the elimination of her ancestors' Patawatomi language: "It's no wonder that our language was forbidden. The language we speak is an affront to the ears of the colonist in every way, because it is a language that challenges the fundamental tenets of Western thinking – that humans alone are possessed of rights and all the rest of the living world exists for human use" (Kimmerer 2017). Here, Kimmerer opens the important perspective that language is not a stable given but can be contested, or even violently erased.

So, what is language, when does language emerge? Language, expression (or, in some cases, words) and the ability to speak only resounds or has an effect if it comes into contact with an interlocutor, an 'other'. The definition of language implies that it serves as a tool of communication (Glock 2015, 328). The word "communicate" derives from the Latin *communicare,* meaning "to join to an equal part, to unite," "to share something or receive a part, to partake, to participate in" (Lewis and Short 1849). Thus, 'nature', the nonhuman or more-than-human world is excluded from the realm of sharing, receiving and taking, from the communal care found within the word communi*care.* At the same time, we could adopt another perspective, namely that humans have never learned to communicate with 'nature' in the sense of the Latin definition; they have not learned to unite with it or to "join to an equal part." – 'Nature' cannot speak, because they are, to take up Steyerl's (2014, 8) reading of Spivak, not heard. Likewise, Bennett argues that the "material powers call for our attentiveness, or even respect." Her point is that matter has been expressing itself (to us) for a long time, but has been ignored. By seeing matter as alive and expressing itself, Bennett wants to illuminate "what is typically cast in the shadow" (2010, ix). Something that lies in the shadows, something that is silent, is present, but kept in the dark. When we ask*,* "Can nature speak?", we need to focus on the 'human' role in this conversation, our response-ability (Haraway 2016), and that includes our willingness to hear the silence and the silenced or the expressions in a language that is not our own (Kimmer 2013, 48). Deconstructing the human exceptionalism of language use, farmer Elisa Lane underlines this by saying that she is still learning the language of the soil. In this vein, Donna Haraway reminds us: "Storying cannot any longer be put in the box of human exceptionalism" (Haraway 2016, 39). In our interviews, the farmers describe reading the soil through "the plants that grow in it and the organisms living within" (Amelia Hazen) or "action, growth, texture" (Allison Worman). They listen to new forms of expressions.

When it comes to the ability of 'nature' to speak, it is necessary to give space to stories that may be told in a language we have yet to learn. However, this 'we' is not unified, as De Sousa Santos argues: "a few of us speak colonial language; the large majority of us speak other languages" (2015, 2). A language that defines 'nature' as an "it," as Kimmerer puts it (2017), is by far not the only existing narrative. In *Spell of the Sensuous*, David Abram

observes: “In indigenous, oral cultures, in other words, language seems to encourage and augment the participatory life of the senses, while in Western civilization language seems to deny or deaden that life, promoting a massive distrust of sensorial experience while valorizing an abstract realm of ideas hidden behind or beyond the sensory appearances” (1996, 51). Following this, broadening the realm of storying can be one form of decolonial un/learning, since as Vázquez states: “to listen means to bridge the colonial difference” (2012, 243).

Sceptical of our current language skills, Bennett warns in *Influx & Efflux* that “[l]anguage will always be an inexact repetition of the press of the outdoors; every wordy composition will be more or less untrue to stupendous, ethereal influences that signal without words” (2020, xxii).[6] Here she overturns the tremendous power that is associated with language and gives importance to more-than-human expressions and meanings. With a wonderful disregard for human exceptionalism, Nelson et al. write: “Sidestepping the human/nonhuman dichotomy, we understand that language straddles the social and the biological, the human and the nonhuman” (2023, 189). We regard these two insights as cornerstones for a decolonial listening.

Comparable to the farmers’ statements, an example of nonhuman storying and decolonial listening is provided by Thom van Dooren and Deborah Bird Rose (2012) in their article *Storied-places in a Multispecies City*, in which they show that animals tell stories and locate meaning. “At the core of our thinking about multispecies storying,” they write, “is the willingness to recognize storied-experience in nonhuman places – to accept nonhumans as ‘narrative subjects’” (van Dooren and Rose 2012, 4). They explain that although penguins in Sydney select their breeding sites according to certain criteria, not every site that meets these criteria is important to them. In this way, they refute the habitat concept. Other factors are relevant, such as the presence of other penguins, their own accumulated experiences at that site, as well as their longing for their own birthplace. Penguins choose places that “carry penguin histories and stories” (2012, 10). Van Dooren and Rose describe how the penguins built “their own richly meaningful and storied worlds,” and conclude their work by stating that penguins are thus “generators and inheritors of meaning” (9). Narration or communicability is thus understood here not only as terms transformed into syntactic constructs. Van Dooren and Rose do not impose the preconceived notion of habitat on penguins and their places, suggesting that penguin nesting sites need only have a particular ecological constellation and are thus interchangeable, but instead focus more precisely on the historiography of penguins in a particular place.

It is easy to criticize this perspective for remaining anthropocentric, for continuing to read penguin stories through the lens of the ‘human’. But one might counter that every conversation, even between two beings considered human, is always shaped by an in-between. All

communication involves interpretation. Every conversation involves a translation, since what one participant says meets the experiential background and the reading of the other participant in the conversation. What makes this exchange possible, however, is the willingness to put oneself in the other person's world of experience. The boundaries of this empathy are determined by the norms of discourse, of the intelligible. The work of translation is expressed by farmer Elisa Lane, one of those farmers Penniman (2023) might call "earth-listeners": "Soil does speak but it takes time to understand its language. I'm still learning." She indirectly explains that response-ability is not easy to achieve. Her interpretation hints at a completely different understanding of involvement with 'the Other', which has been elaborated by Karen Barad. Barad warns that "entanglements are not a name for the interconnectedness of all being as one, but rather for specific material relations of the ongoing differentiating of the world. Entanglements are relations of obligation – being bound to the Other – enfolded traces of Othering. Othering […] entails an indebtedness to the 'Other.' [...] 'Otherness' is an entangled relation of difference (*différance*)" (Barad 2010, 65). This approach would be a radical reformulation of the concept of the 'Other'. It implies that 'the Other' is not something that must be distinguished or separated from the self, but that the very naming of the 'Other' resonates within the self and thus produces entanglement and response-ability. Differentiation would thus be understood as a material action that does not separate but, on the contrary, connects and commits (Barad 2015, 163). These very commitments are already practiced in the world we call 'nature.' For example, animal species that have the same frequencies in their sounds remain silent while other animal species are communicating on the same frequency to allow them to have their dialogue (Bubnoff 2015). Consideration, then, is also a form of communication, and that also means letting others speak, as well as noticing silence. In order to care adequately, one must know how to understand, how to 'read' the expressions of 'the other'. This requires some training, which may not be easy. Kimmerer explains in relation to her fieldwork as a biologist that she cannot ask salmon directly what they need – so she asks them through experimentation and tries to listen carefully to their responses (Kimmerer 2013, 284). Similarly, from an agricultural perspective, farmers' ability to read the soil's expressions is made possible by their specific peasant knowledge about soil, plants, textures. In addition, knowledge of and experience in a certain place seems to be required. What the farmer Allison Worman describes as "action, growth, texture" may well vary from region to region, requiring a close reading of a particular place that unfolds over time. The exchange is possible because of a deep understanding of the broader ecological interrelations, an understanding of the context, the surroundings, the exposition and many other factors in a certain place. Vanessa Watts describes, from a Mohawk/Anishinaabe perspective, the conception of Place-Thought, which is "the non-distinctive space where place and thought were never separated because

they never could or can be separated. Place-Thought is based upon the premise that land is alive and thinking and that humans and non-humans derive agency through the extensions of these thoughts" (2013, 21). Along similar lines, farmer Amelia Hazen answered the question "How does the soil care for you?" by saying, "I appreciate the way soil makes me think and grow." This farming perspective illustrates an understanding of mutual co-becoming, or as Escobar outlined, "things and beings are their relations, they do not exist prior to them" (2016, 18).

Farming will always be a nonhuman-human encounter in a certain place. The activity of farming is a re-action guided by tentative questioning. Through plants, the soil tells us whether it is healthy or rich in nitrogen, whether it needs water or is in a stable condition. Plants let us know about the soil's community members, its/their needs, what kind of protection a particular soil desires, what it is afraid of, and also what the soil is able to give or how we need to interact with this soil to receive from it what we desire from this relationship. So we can read plants as soil's language – a language that gives voice to the mycorrhiza fungi, microbes, algae, micropores, the whole highly connected web, which is not just beneath us, since we are part of it. These are not poetics that lie beneath us, this is what holds us up. Careful gardening is one way of responding to questions by another that call "us" to action. The act of careful gardening and farming is a re-action led by a request. What is more, sometimes it is a receiving without ever having asked for anything. For this we need a willingness to communicate, and for communication we need a willingness to be attentive, to take care – or as Thom van Dooren et al. put it, "arts of attentiveness" (2016, 1), which they describe as "modes of both paying attention to others and crafting meaningful response.

> We need to care for one another, to lend an ear; we might want to start listening, because "to listen can indicate much more than simply a sound coming to our ears […]. [D]eep attentive listening is an act of honoring – honoring the other, who speaks to us, telling the stories of their being in various voices and sounds." (Kato 2015, 111)

Listening, as Pauline Oliveros shows, is "the potential for connection and interaction with one's environment" (Oliveros 2005; quoted in Kato, 2015, 111). Since the meaning of care, as Thom van Dooren says, "is to be affected by another, to be emotionally at stake in them in some way [… and] to become subject to another" (van Dooren 2014, 291), the 'othering' is deconstructed and with care the object becomes subject – within us. Sophie Chao and Dion Enari describe such a process in "Decolonizing Climate Change: A Call for Beyond-Human Imaginaries and Knowledge Generation" (2021, 40), based on the knowledge and experiences of Kabi, an Indigenous Gimi man, suggesting that "we might learn to know and imagine the climate through our bodily flesh and fluids – the air that we breathe, the waters that nourish us, and the soils that hold us." This is what multispecies worlds are about. To care for another, to

sense that the Other is entangled with us, in us, but at the same time is not like us. This understanding enables stories, in which, as Haraway states, "multispecies players, who are enmeshed in partial and flawed translations across difference, redo ways of living and dying attuned to still possible finite flourishing, still possible recuperation" (Haraway 2016, 10). To deal with climate change and the socioecological crises of our time, "we must change the story; the story must change" (2016, 40). The un/learning will mean telling other stories, and especially letting others, including nonhumans, tell stories to change the story/s.

Listening to the 'environment' would mean finding ways of responding affirmatively to the silent exploitation of 'nature' (and 'humans').[7] Human-nature relationships such as factory farming, desertification, ocean eutrophication, silent and "slow violence" (Nixon, 2011) through pesticide use, exploitation of (seasonal) workers, or land grabbing would have to be changed because they are unaccountable in a relationship of care, in doing together. We should not cling to the easy anthropocentric idea that 'nature' cannot speak, for 'our relationship with land cannot heal until we hear its stories' (Kimmerer 2013, 9).

Conclusion

"To think-with is to stay with the naturalcultural multispecies trouble on earth." (Haraway 2016, 40)

Having shown how 'nature' has been repeatedly understood as 'the other', even as calls for change have been voiced, we examined one of the most profound distinguishing features between 'humans' and 'nature,' the use of language, by asking the question "Can nature speak?," and in doing so showed, through our theoretical investigation and enriched by the voices of Baltimore farmers, that 'arts of attentiveness' and 'deep listening' as well as acts of translation make 'communication' possible.

The responses of the farmers are counter-narratives to hegemonic conceptions of the human-nature relationship. They highlight that the call for more-than-human perspectives and for the response-ability that we examined while asking whether 'nature' can speak is neither meant as a metaphorical call for a better world, nor as a linguistic or theoretical experiment, but is instead grounded in material and existing realities, in which language is not here to represent or analyze 'nature' but is made and used by what we like to call 'nature' – by humans and nonhumans alike. The responses of the farmers can be understood as a prelude to the radical shift in climate change discourses called for by Yusoff (in Löffler et al. 2020).

In summary, our article does not seek to show that 'nature' needs only to be understood differently, but to highlight that when 'we' begin to establish less exploitative ways of encountering what we call 'nature' or, following Gayatri Spivak, if 'we' begin to listen differently, 'we' will see that we do not have to think 'nature' differently but will experience another kind of

'nature' – one that is silenced, including by climate change discourses, but has never been silent. 'Nature,' then, is no longer thought of *as something,* but becomes someone "to think with" (Haraway, 2016), not something to talk about, but someone to engage with and listen to. Thus, the disruptive distinction between 'human' and 'nature' is challenged, as the Latin roots of communication lead us to an understanding of becoming-with each other. Therefore, we should endeavor to "join to an equal part; to unite" with 'nature'. "Decolonizing is a process and not an event; it is ongoing unlearning to relearn," according to Sultana (2022, 10). Can we unlearn colonial language and hear the "language of animacy" (Kimmerer 2017)? In communication and commun-i-care, we can find an "I" and a "commune" and "action" and "care." Maybe these are missing pieces for the much-needed change in responding otherwise to climate change. We might want to listen to what it means to share this world in communal action. We might want to overcome circumstances in which we need to ask whether 'nature' can speak, we might want to establish worlds in which we are able to respond with care to the question: "What do you hear the earth saying to humans at this time?" (Penniman, 2023).

Notes

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[2] The farming perspective from which this article is written also means that the authors' position stands for more than the two 'human' authors. This article is "unthinkable" (Haraway 2016) without the land, the soil, the fields which taught me first, since as a farm child I learned to communicate with them before human language became a tool for expression.

[3] In the following, terms such as human and nature are placed in single quotation marks to illustrate the problematic character of these categorizations. Nature is not a monolith, nor is humanity. Such standardizations reproduce hegemonic worldviews. Moreover, participation in 'the human' was and is violently contested.

[4] Such unification has also been criticized in response to the discourse on climate change and the concept of the Anthropocene (Davis and Todd 2017; Mirzoeff 2018; Haraway, 2016).

[5] Cases in which rivers, for example, have been given rights as a "juristic/legal person/living entity" (Kothari and Bajpai 2017) could partly be read as attempts to counter the silencing of nature. A discussion of the limits and anthropocentrism of those rights can be found in Kothari and Bajpai 2017.

[6] A description of the term *anexact*, which Bennett borrows from Deleuze/Guattari, can be found in Bennett 2020, 119.

[7] By environment, we mean the surroundings in a certain place of a certain being, and not an anthropocentric notion of 'nature' as the periphery surrounding a 'human' centre.

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Sophie von Redecker *(corresponding author)* is a Phd candidate and lecturer at the Department of Organic Agriculture at Kassel University, Germany. She holds a scholarship from the Rosa-Luxemburg Foundation. Her research focuses on Critical Agrarian Studies with a special focus on more-than-human ontologies, queer and postcolonial perspectives and decolonial and indigenous approaches. Recently she started a new inter- and transdisciplinary field of (art-based) research: Agrarian (Post-)Humanities, in which she investigates the human-nature relationship from a farming perspective. She is part of the peasant movement La Via Campesina and is actively engaged in exploring and theorizing scholar activism. First, she was taught by sheep and strawberries on the organic farm where she grew up. E-mail: redecker@uni-kassel.de

Christian Herzig is Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Centre for Sustainable Food Systems at the Justus Liebig University (JLU) Giessen, Germany. Christian is Programme Director of the MSc in Sustainable Food Business (in German) and Professor at the Institute for Business Administration in the Agricultural and Food Sector at JLU’s Faculty of Agricultural

Sciences, Nutritional Sciences, and Environmental Management. He held previous professorial appointments at the University of Kassel, Germany, Nottingham Trent University and University of Nottingham, United Kingdom. E-mail: Christian.Herzig@fb09.uni-giessen.de

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For the land has eyes: soils and bodies in Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner's poetry

Chiara Lanza

University School for Advanced Studies of Pavia and University of Ferrara

ABSTRACT

In recent years, Marshallese poet Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner has increasingly entered academic debates. Working at the intersection of poetry, performance, reportage and activism, her art is a fitting example of both aesthetic and material engagements with the legacy of nuclear colonialism and the environmental crisis. The ways in which she re-interprets her community's local lore provide a link between the Pacific islands' past and their uncertain present, which is jeopardised by rising sea levels. Going beyond Epeli Hau'ofa, who identified the ocean as a unifying element for Pacific islanders (2008a), this paper proposes to read a selection of Jetñil-Kijiner's poems starting from human-land relations. In particular, poems such as "Fishbone Hair," "Hooked," "Lidepdepju," and "Tell Them" (published in *Iep Jāltok*, 2017) will be discussed to explore how past and present catastrophes have reconfigured islanders' relationships with the land. These relations are exemplified by their changing diets and imported foods, and by the dynamics of eating and being eaten (Chao 2021) that play out through human and more-than-human bodies in the South Pacific region. Specifically, the human bodies portrayed by Jetñil-Kijiner could be interpreted as territories of transition that connect the soil to the ocean and past injustice to present precariousness. They might be compared with ecological ecotones that link not only ecosystems but also timescapes in an ecological continuum, while retaining their own specificities. In a 2015 article, Jetñil-Kijiner suggested that the land has eyes. Indeed, even if people ignore or forget this aspect, soils bear the evidence of anthropogenic disturbance, exploitation, and slow violence.

Keywords

Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner, poetry, nuclear colonialism, environmental crisis, food

Introduction

In *Decolonial Ecology* (2022), scholar Malcom Ferdinand argues that modernity is characterised by a double fracture, meaning that there exists a difficulty in thinking colonial violence and environmental destruction together (2022, 8). However, the history of the Marshall Islands shows how colonial and environmental issues have been, especially since 1946, inextricably entangled. The recent trauma of nuclear colonialism (Johnston 2015, 140), with its devastating consequences on human health and island ecologies, connects with present struggles for recognition and support in climate change adaptation and mitigation efforts. The Marshall Islands, together with many other Pacific atolls and islands, are today at the forefront of climate change, being greatly impacted by continued sea-level rise (SLR) and extreme sea level (ESL) events. In a 2018 article, Ford, Merrifield, and Becker write that "sea-

level rise is predicted to destabilise atoll islands, leaving them at risk of chronic coastal erosion" (2018, 1274), a statement confirmed by SLR projections in the sixth assessment report of the IPCC. In chapter 15 of the IPCC's *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability*, which is devoted to Small Islands, it is possible to read that "many low-lying coastal areas at all latitudes, including small islands, will experience SLR and ESL events such as coastal storm surges and coastal flooding more frequently in the coming decades" (Mycoo et al. 2022, 2048). The work of poet and activist Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner is located at the centre of these overlapping issues and could be interpreted as a post-nuclear and post-colonial engagement with the environmental crisis, as well as with local ecologies, traditional knowledge, and trans-corporeal interactions.

This paper focuses on a selection of Jetñil-Kijiner's poems and proposes to read them from the perspective of material entities such as rocks, plastics, and foods. The choice of this perspective, which takes as a point of reference the land instead of the ocean, comes as a response to a 2015 article written by Jetñil-Kijiner for *Climate Home News*, in which she quotes from a Rotuman proverb stating that "the land has eyes". Indeed, soils and vegetation bear the evidence of anthropogenic disturbance, exploitation, and slow violence. Consequently, far from imposing a land-centric view on the poet's work, this paper aims at enriching discussions around Pacific literatures and their seascapes. For instance, scholars like Elizabeth DeLoughrey (2007) and Michelle Keown (2018) have greatly contributed to this field by investigating the entanglements between land and sea, and by foregrounding the centrality of the ocean in the relationship between islanders and their islands.

Poems such as "Fishbone Hair," "Hooked," "Lidepdepju," and "Tell Them" (published in the 2017 collection *Iep Jāltok*) will be discussed to explore how past and present catastrophes have reconfigured islanders' connection with the land and its stories. These relations are exemplified by their changing diets and imported foods, and by the dynamics of eating and being eaten (Chao 2021) that play out through human and more-than-human bodies in the South Pacific region. Specifically, the human bodies portrayed by Jetñil-Kijiner will be interpreted as territories of transition that connect the soil to the ocean and past injustice to present precariousness. The second section of this paper is specifically devoted to exploring these entanglements, in which bodies become comparable to ecological ecotones.

Given the specific focus of this paper, some considerations on atoll soils and on Pacific islander's relationship with the land seem necessary. First, the prevalent soil type on Pacific atolls and islands are sandy carbonatic soils. Their characteristics do not allow intensive and extensive agriculture despite the favourable temperature regime and abundant sunlight (Deenik and Yost 2006). However, plants such as coconut, pandanus, and breadfruit, have long been grown in this area. Studies have confirmed that the presence of trees in the centre of the islands, or of shrubs and vines along the shores, contributes to increasing soils' organic

content and, consequently, their fertility (Deenik and Yost 2006; Stone, Migvar, and Robison 2000). In their article, Stone, Migvar, and Robison suggest that "some of the black soils at the center of wide islands rank with the best soils of Russia and the American Midwest, except for their shortage of potassium and the uncertainties of rainfall" (1). Knowledge of the sandy soil and its characteristics is essential to preserve traditional agriculture and local plant varieties in our age of climate change.

Moreover, this type of earth is linked with cultural practices and beliefs, such as in ceremonies connected to the coming of life. In novels like *L'Ile des Rêves Ecrasés* by Tahitian author Chantal Spitz (2007) or *The Whale Rider* by Neo-Zealander writer Witi Ihimaera (1987), the birth of the main character is celebrated by planting the mother's placenta into the family lands or, in *The Whale Rider*'s case, in the *marae*, a space of belonging and spiritual connection to the ancestors. For most of these indigenous communities, birth ceremonies are propitiatory and symbolic, and they are thought to connect the newborns with the land and with their familiar lineage. As the anthropologist and social thinker Epeli Hau'ofa writes in his essay "Pasts to Remember" (2008b), this link is embedded in many Austronesian languages, in which placenta, womb and land are all designated by the same word (2008b, 73). "People and land are indivisible" (74), he writes, meaning that they both depend on one another, and removing one of the two would mean eroding identities and cultures.

Finally, rocks are an important element in Pacific Islands' cosmologies. In particular, they surface in the poetry of Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner who, in turn, draws inspiration from myths and local lore to reinterpret the present. Rocks, sand, and soil are intimately connected on the vast scales of geological time, as it is also from the chemical and physical weathering of stones that sand, silt, and clay originate and aggregate to form earth. Their presence tells of deep time and of legends, but it is also connected to the present through their enduring symbolical meaning and their material transformations. One of these transformations occurred because of nuclear experimentation, which affected the South Pacific region from the mid-1940s till 1996, when France conducted its last underground test in the island of Fangataufa (Thakur 1996, 466). Radioactive isotopes can still be traced in soil samples from some islands (Corcho-Alvarado et al. 2021) and their permanence in the environment has been proposed as a stratigraphic marker of the Anthropocene (Waters et al. 2018, 379). In "The Sea is Rising: Visualising Climate Change in the Pacific Islands," DeLoughrey describes the 1954 Bravo detonation "an originary event for the Anthropocene" (2018, 185).

The focus of the present paper will be on rocks-soils-human connections as they emerge from Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner's work and the bodies she represents. In the first section of my analysis, I will focus on the idea that "the land has eyes" as evoked in Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner's collection (2017), also through a close reading of her poems "Lidepdepju" and "Tell Them."

Second, I foreground the interactions between land and humans, and how the dynamics of eating and being eating are central in poems such as “Fishbone Hair” and “Hooked.”

The Land has Eyes: Rocks, Styrofoam, and White Sands

In a 2015 article published on the *Climate Home News* website, Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner writes of an interview she had with a CNN reporter who asked her about climate migration, and the impact of the loss of islands on Pacific islanders. Living on Pacific islands and atolls is not just “being ocean.” The ocean is undeniably a unifying element, a point that Epeli Hau‘ofa stresses in his essays “Our Sea of Islands” (2008a) and “The Ocean in Us” (2008c). In the latter, in particular, he claims that the ocean, instead of dividing, is a strong and unifying presence for all maritime people, being a space of origin, cultural belonging, sustenance, and future (2008c, 57-58). As the Italian scholar Paola Della Valle states, from an indigenous perspective the sea is “not an obstacle but a resource, an opportunity and a way of communicating that goes beyond all kinds of national and economic boundaries” (Della Valle 2018, 244; my translation). Despite these considerations land is not secondary or interchangeable: it is on the connection between water, land, and sky that Pacific islanders have built their identity and sense of belonging. The shape of a lagoon, a grove of trees, and a pile of rocks are tangible as well as symbolic entities that animate the storyworld of Indigenous islanders and teach about permanence. Permanence is a concept that Jetñil-Kijiner highlights in her article and that also emerges from her poems, such as “Rise,” written and performed together with Greenlandic artist Aka Niviâna (2018). These material and immaterial connections and resonances are embedded into the landscape and ‘remembered’ by it: as the poet claims, by quoting from a Rotuman proverb, the land has eyes (2015). Consequently, it observes and records, and it does not forget human greed with its power to destroy.

The idea that land sees and remembers is no stranger to soil science. The concept of soil memory, which is defined as “the ability of this system to memorize its past” (Targulian and Bronnikova 2019, 230), has shaped this discipline since its beginnings in the 20th century, especially driven by studies on paleosols as sources of information on the past. From the original formulation of soils as “mirrors,” the idea of memory has taken form, and has been developed by various soil scientists and scholars. Richter and Yaalon, for example, talk about “palimpsest” (2012) to highlight the complexity of soil systems whose movements through time are rarely continuous or displaying a definite chronological order (as the idea of memory might suggest). The archival nature of soils results from the interaction of the so-called “penetrating” factors of soil formation (such as climate and organisms) with “perceiving” and redistributing factors, like geologic material (Targulian and Bronnikova 2019, 231). This process of memorisation does, however, not only concern climate, rocks, and organisms. As Wells (2006)

points out, there is a cultural aspect that needs to be taken into account: together with environmental changes, human behaviours and humans' relationship with the land get inscribed into the record as well. It is through this inscription of meanings and attitudes that some of the poems of Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner speak.

Jetñil-Kijiner's poem "Lidepdepju" has received particular attention because of the ways in which the author reinterprets local legends to talk about her islands' present. In this poem, she accompanies the reader to the shore to meet Lidepdepju:

Let me take you out to see Lidepdepju
through overgrown leaves winding
breadfruit trees and twisting pandanus
slapping at mosquitoes and red ants that sting
sand and dirt itching your toes,
through that clearing, follow
the roar of the ocean
(Jetñil-Kijiner 2017, 9)

This poem comes right next to another one titled "Liwātuonmour," and together they narrate the story of the sisters Liwātuonmour and Lidepdepju. This narrative has different variations. Nevertheless, the one that the poet chose to deal with recounts of how, in ancient times, two sisters, who had the shape of pillars of basalt, were the mothers and goddesses to their people. "Their stone bodies" Jetñil-Kijiner explains, "were used to sharpen knives and spears before battles" (2015). A protestant missionary, Dr. Rife, decided to throw Liwātuonmour's body into the ocean, in order to eradicate Pagan beliefs. The Goddess was thus swallowed by the ocean, and "welcomed the earth. That churned and birthed her" (Jetñil-Kijiner 2017, 8). Lidepdepju was left alone, and it is her that the poet allows readers to meet and celebrate with offerings.

This is our gift for you, Lidepdepju –
baskets of fresh bwiro, salted fish
The finest jaki caress
basalt calluses of your skin
We are here
to pay tribute, to ask
for your guidance

We are here

to ask for your strength

(Jetñil-Kijiner 2017, 9)

The offerings come in the form of traditional food and a "jaki," a mat, whose design and patterns are "representative of Marshallese society" and carry cultural values such as genealogy, family, and land inheritance woven into them (Jetñil Kijiner 2014, 34). The poem concludes as follows:

Lidepdepju we are here

to sharpen

our spears

for war

(Jetñil-Kijiner 2017, 9)

Lidepdepju is thus more than a rock, and the word rock itself is never mentioned in this poem, the "basalt calluses of your skin" (2017, 9) being the only reference to its lithic nature. Indeed, it is a symbol: it is past, present and future, it is both land and water. "The active presence of Liwātuonmour and Lidepdepju," Rebecca Purse writes, "suggests that natural beings possess an agency and power that is brought forward through these traditional stories" (2021, 18). Cultural memory is expressed through the legends associated with them, but also through the material marks left by spears and knives on Lidepdepju's body. These marks are renewed and add layers to this ancient story while recounting the islands' history.

When talking about the relationship between islanders and landscape, Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner does not only refer to rocks. Indeed, the poem titled "Tell Them" (2017) is structured as a sort of quest to understand identity and belonging through different material and nonmaterial entities, all characterising the culture and everyday encounters of Marshallese people. It is addressed to a general "them" which, instead of creating a dichotomy, enables the poem to welcome the reader into the world of islanders. The anaphoric repetition of "Tell them we are" (2017, 64-67) multiplies meanings and connections, and links the poem to Epeli Hau'ofa's work "We Are the Ocean" (2008). However, in Jetñil-Kijiner's interpretation, Marshallese people are more than the ocean, they are:

toasted dark brown as the carved ribs/ of a tree stump

descendants / of the finest navigators / in the world

the hollow hulls / of canoes

wood shavings / and drying pandanus leaves / and sticky bwiros at kemems

styrofoam cups of koolaid red

dusty rubber slippers swiped / from concrete doorsteps

shards of broken beer bottles / burrowed beneath fine white sand

(Jetñil-Kijiner 2017, 65-66)

These are just some of the images that the poet proposes to describe her people. The final part of the poem is devoted to explaining the danger of rising sea waters, and the shock derived from seeing "the entire ocean__level__with the land" (Jetñil-Kijiner 2017, 66). Jetñil-Kijiner concludes by saying:

But most importantly you tell them

we don't want to leave

we've never wanted to leave

and that we

are nothing

without our islands

(Jetñil-Kijiner 2017, 66-67)

In the original text, the last three lines are divided by blank spaces, and they stand alone on the right page. These verses sound like a desperate cry for help, a cry of frustration and anger, and a claim of belonging, rootedness, and connection. "Tell them" brings the reader into the everyday's life of the Marshallese people. This is a reality in which 'permanence' is not only represented by rock, but is entangled with other signs of the Anthropocene, such as Styrofoam, rubber, and glass. These Anthropocenic objects coexist alongside wood shavings and leaves, which are the organic material of soil formation. They are the new symbols and the technofossils of our era, whose contradictions are particularly symbolised by Styrofoam and glass. Styrofoam is a brand of foamed polystyrene, and thus it is related to plastics. Its nature, however, makes it even harder to dispose of and recycle than common plastics. Its danger resides precisely in its being generally considered as a disposable material, while its permanence in the environment (in various forms, such as micro plastics) is everlasting. Thus, Styrofoam complicates issues of plasticity, smoothness, whiteness, and deathlessness. As Farrier writes, "the haunting augury of Styrofoam's ostensible deathlessness disorients linear perspectives on time: it is the distant future here, now, in plastic form" (2019, 79). Glass is not equally permanent, but the fact that it is represented as a threat hiding underneath white, fine sand is equally meaningful. Indeed, sand and glass are related, one being a derivative of the

other, and on the Marshallese beaches they come together in the form of a threat (broken bottles burrowed beneath the sand).

Both Styrofoam and glass thus enter the ecological cycles and become inscribed into the history of these people, via the land and ocean. Going back to Jetñil-Kijiner's statement, the land has eyes, and therefore it sees, and records these alterations. If rocks are symbols of past stories and of permanence, plastics is the fossil of the future, and together with the many other discarded objects of the Anthropocene, it is destined to become part of the soil's material and cultural memory. However, "Tell Them" highlights how Marshallese identity can be represented by many other, more positive, symbols and objects. Amongst them, there are "the hollow hulls / of canoes" (Jetñil-Kijiner 2017, 65). Canoes, besides being an "icon of indigenous renaissance" (DeLoughrey 2007, 127), can also be seen as land and trees projected onto the ocean. They symbolise the need to juggle with space and time scales to attempt to navigate the threats, fears, and hopes that characterise the present.

Eating and Being Eaten

The title "Eating and Being Eaten" comes from a 2021 article by anthropologist Sophie Chao, in which she examines the meanings and aetiology of hunger, as well as the dynamics between feeder-fed-food, among the Marind community of West Papua. Hunger, she claims, is culturally modulated and context dependent, and involves institutions, foreign corporations, and more-than-human entities alongside imported and traditional foods. In particular, she identifies four main types of hunger among Marind people: hunger for forest foods, plastic foods, money, and human flesh (2021, 5). Plastic foods, in particular, have come to replace forest-derived foods, whose availability has drastically decreased due to deforestation and agribusiness development. They encompass rice, noodles, and biscuits, often wrapped in colourful and bright plastics. They are foods which, instead of satiating, seem to intensify hunger and make bodies weaker. In other words, Marind people eat and are eaten by plastic foods. The present section proposes to read two of Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner's poems, "Fishbone Hair" and "Hooked", in the light of the dynamics described by Chao. In addition, Marshallese bodies are reinterpreted as narrative sites and ecotones, that is, territories of transition that connect the soil to the ocean and past injustice to present precariousness.

On Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner's website it is possible to read that "Fishbone Hair" was written after the death of her eight-year-old niece, Bianca Lanki, who died of leukaemia. She writes that this poem is "a reflection on the many Marshallese who've passed away from cancer, and other radiation related illnesses, and the legacy of the US nuclear testing program on our islands" (Jetñil-Kijiner 2016). The poem is divided into eight parts, like Bianca's age when she passed away, and each is structured and arranged in different ways on the page. While

pointing at a hairstyle, its title is also a reference to the mutation of bone marrow and loss of hair, conditions associated with leukaemia. Instead of displaying a linear narrative, the poem shows Bianca's body through multiple time scales, as it is transformed into both a battlefield and a transition zone in which radiation, hair, food, grief, and legends meet, clash, and entangle:

II.

There had been a war

raging inside Bianca's six year old bones

white cells had staked their flag

they conquered the territory of her tiny body

(Jetñil-Kijiner 2017, 25)

The poet links her niece's condition to what fishermen experienced and were told in the aftermath of the Bikini Atoll nuclear bombings. In particular, Bianca's loss of hair is linked to fishermen's dusting the radioactive ash from their heads (ash which they thought was snow, Jetñil-Kijiner explains in "History Project"), and both are described in reference to the act of eating or catching fish. The link is not only symbolic but tells of the enduring bodily consequences of exposure to nuclear radiation as a result of the atomic test bombings that took place in the South Pacific from 1946. In a discussion of Alaimo and Hekman's book *Material Feminisms* (2007), Serenella Iovino maintains that the body can be seen as a starting point for an exploration of materiality, since it is "the site where matter more clearly performs its narratives" (2012, 136). The narrative here foregrounded is one dealing with radioactive isotopes, U.S. officials and military, unaware islanders, ecological and social injustice, and fish:

IV.

Bianca loved

to eat fish

she ate it raw ate it fried ate it whole

she ate it with its head

slurping on the eyeball jelly

leaving only

tiny

neat

bones

(Jetñil-Kijiner 2017, 27)

These lines evoke images of an almost rapacious hunger, one which leaves nothing but tiny, neat bones. By contrast, part VII tells of a Chamorro legend about a "giant coral eating fish" (Jetñil-Kijiner 2017, 30) that threatened to destroy the islands, and was caught thanks to a net some women wove with their hair. Again, hair and fish are entangled throughout the poem. Furthermore, the image of a voracious and monstrous fish eating islands reverses the story of Bianca eating fish: eating and being eaten are inextricable, and the eight-year-old girl's body becomes the site where these dynamics develop. Bianca devours and, at the same time, is devoured by cancer, which leaves nothing but "rootless hair / that hair without a home" (Jetñil-Kijiner 2017, 24).

A further instance of the interaction between nuclear testing, food, and bodies can be found in the effects of the plastic foods Sophie Chao talks about, and that Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner describes in her poem "Hooked". Divided into four parts, this poem tells of World War II and the epidemics of diabetes that ensued, and still persists, in Marshallese society. The questions and research path that brought Jetñil-Kijiner to link these two events and write about them in "Hooked" are well narrated in a blog post on her website. She explains how she got to question the quality of the foods she most cherishes and associates with her childhood, and how she got to correlate them with increasing diabetes rates among the population. Diabetes, she explains, is in turn linked with World War II, which was fought on the lands and over the skies of Pacific atolls. The intense hunger experienced by both starving Japanese soldiers and local inhabitants came to an end thanks to the U.S. liberation, which resulted in:

box after box after box
of canned spam, flaky biscuits
chocolate bars, dry sausages, hard candy and
bags and bags of rice all waiting
to be eaten
(Jetñil-Kijiner 2017, 15)

Present concerns over food security and soils management in the Marshall Islands are tied with the dependence on imported and processed foods that entered the diet of islanders with the end of WWII, as Deenik and Yost explain in their article on atoll soils and crop production. "This dependency on processed food," they claim, "is a significant factor contributing to declining health associated with the rise of chronic diseases like hypertension and diabetes" (2006, 666). Thus, satisfying extreme hunger and "the taste / of a filled belly" (Jetñil-Kijiner 2017, 16) came at the cost of being eaten in return by disease:

And even after
his breathing
turned heavy even
after his joints
protested to walk to the store
even after the devious tingle trickled
into his arms, even after
the doctors
told him the leg

would have to go,
even then

he never
stopped
licking the grease
from his fingers
(Jetñil-Kijiner 2017, 17)

Consequently, the increased consumption of processed and hyper-caloric foods resulted in the "demise of traditional agriculture" (Deenik and Yost 2006, 666) and in bodies consumed by diabetes. As Iovino writes, "the body [...] is a living text in which ecological and existential relationships are inscribed in terms of health or disease" (2012, 137): in and out of the body food – and the values and cultural meanings that come with it – leave their marks and have the power to unsettle long-established ecological relationships. Embedded in histories of trauma, bodies become comparable to ecological ecotones. In ecology, ecotones are defined as "areas of steep transition between ecological communities, ecosystems, or ecological regions along an environmental gradient," and studies have shown how "species richness and abundances tend to peak in ecotonal areas" (Kark 2013, 1). They are, in other words, zones of interaction and tension (the very word is a compound of *oikos*, home, and *tonus*, tension). An example of ecotone is the transition area that links a field with some wood, where shrubs, bushes and young trees grow. Consequently, the ecotone presents characteristics of the areas that it connects, while also retaining its own ecological specificity. Rarely it is possible to see neat borders, as ecotones in nature are more often part of an ecological continuum (Kark 2013, 2).

The idea of body as ecological ecotone can be directly associated with that of trans-corporeality as proposed by Stacy Alaimo in *Bodily Natures* (2010), where she describes the term as the "interchanges and interconnections between various bodily natures," and claims that this concept "underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from 'the environment'" (2010, 2). Therefore, the human body is an area of transit and interaction, but not a passive one: ecological relations transform it and are in turn transformed during their flow across bodies. This bodily permeability makes boundaries blur, as in ecological ecotones. Ash, fish, rice, biscuits and noodles flow into the bodies that Jetñil-Kijiner describes, interact with them, and manifest as cancer or diabetes. It is not, however, food alone that enters the body: it is, for instance, polluted soils, radioactive isotopes in fish bones and tissue, fats, sugars, and polluted water. Nevertheless, there are also legends, past injustice, stories of contamination and starvation, and present threats that interact and entangle, as the poet shows in poems such as "Fishbone Hair," where the complex relations between all these elements emerge and manifest through the lock of hair left by Bianca.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to offer an alternative reading of a selection of poems published in the 2017 collection *Iep Jāltok*, by Marshallese poet Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner. Instead of focusing on the Pacific Ocean as a space of interaction and belonging, the analysis centred around the idea of soils, rocks, and bodies as material sites in which cultural memory is inscribed. This choice was not intended to present a land-sea dichotomy, but rather to enrich discussions around the irreducibility of one to the other, in an age in which entire islands risk disappearing under rising sea waters. The picture that has emerged from the analysis of the selected poems is one of complex and multi-layered relationships between rocks and memory, plastics and sand, bodies and foods, pollutants and disease. In particular, the first section of this article has focused on the poems "Lidepdepju" and "Tell Them." Both show how cultural memory is inscribed into and flows through material entities, be they soils – as in the model proposed by Wells (2006) or in the idea of palimpsest discussed by Richter and Yaalon (2012) – or rocks, as in the case of Jetñil-Kijiner's poem "Lidepdepju." Through processes such as erosion and weathering, rocks become one of the factors of soil formation. However, the poem "Tell Them" shows how materials such as rubber, plastics, and glass have entered ecological cycles too, and are destined to add new meanings and layers into soils' material and cultural memory.

The second half of the article shifts the attention from rocks and sands to human bodies, and to interactions between pollution, foods, and disease. While the poem "Fishbone Hair" deals with the long-term consequences of nuclear testing through the figure of the eight-year-old Bianca, "Hooked" proposes a reflection on diabetes, and on how bodies got "consumed"

by the new foods that were introduced in the aftermath of WWII. The article concludes with a comparison between ecological ecotones and human bodies, both being dynamic sites of exchange and interaction.

All of the elements introduced in this paper recount of the complex relations among the inhabitants of the Marshall Islands, soil, and water, which are modified by knotted histories and stories. In particular, the relationship and interaction with soil emerges through accounts of attachment to the land, through the crops that can grow on it, the demise of traditional agriculture, imported foods, and glass shards under white sands. To conclude, the land does have eyes and the material and symbolical traces of past social and ecological injustice manifest in different forms. Exploring the memory of sandy carbonatic soils of atoll islands is not a task left for agronomists alone. It is a collective endeavour, in which, as Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner shows us, poetry plays a fundamental role.

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Chiara Lanza is a Ph.D. candidate in Sustainable Development and Climate Change at the University School for Advanced Studies of Pavia (IUSS Pavia), Italy, and is currently hosted by the University of Ferrara. She holds a master's degree in modern Languages and Literatures from the University of Turin. Her current research project focuses on representations of endangered environments and environmental injustice in works of literature written by contemporary Anglophone and Francophone authors. In particular, she is interested in exploring human-soil relations, how they are represented in literary texts, and how literature, in turn, can inspire practices of soil care. E-mail: chiara.lanza@iusspavia.it

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Surrounding the fort: artificial intelligence, identity, art

Andrea Barcaro

University of Lisbon

ABSTRACT

This article stems from a speculative experimentation combining text with AI-powered visuality to reflect on the connection between technology and emerging posthuman identities in the context of the postcolonial environmental humanities. I make friends with an algorithm, the Midjourney Bot, and feed it prompts based on quotes by scholars from the fields of posthumanism, postcolonialism, and other branches of critical theory, with a focus on topics surrounding architecture, the human body, European identity, and the relation between technology and the Anthropocene. In my effort to explore how interaction with AI shapes our identities, I emphasise the role of dialogue with human and non-human Others in guiding design practices that inspire ethically charged, productive, and affirmative visions of our world.

Keywords

Posthumanism, postcolonialism, artificial intelligence, Anthropocene, Europe

Introduction: Making Friends with an Algorithm

It has happened. Artificial intelligence (AI) has conquered the last bastion of human exceptionalism – creativity. This has caused reactions by artists who denounce the looting of the human archive at the hands of big tech, while CEOs are hard at work making wild claims about their technology's ability to solve humanity's problems and spark the next evolutionary leap (Klein 2023). In this highly emotional context, I choose to take a different route, and rather than asking whether we are witnessing the death of art and a new death of the author, I experiment with text and AI-powered visuality to reflect on the connection between technology and the emergence of posthuman forms of identity. Taking a relational view of subjectivity and identity, I make friends with an algorithm, the Midjourney Bot,[1] and feed it prompts based on quotes by scholars from the fields of postcolonialism, the digital and environmental humanities, and other branches of critical theory. My objective is best described by what Joanna Zylinska calls "doing ethics as/in fiction," an invitation to use AI by telling better stories about AI while also imagining better ways of living with AI (2020, 31). I interlace cultural analysis with speculative storytelling, hoping to inspire productive thinking and remove some steam from heated discussions across the media and popular discourse.

Creativity is a fluid concept. Echoing Jan Løhmann Stephensen, all forms of creativity are emergent, contingent, artificial, and in constant dialogue with different political or

ideological agendas (2022, 32). AI art is inherently posthuman, as it decenters the human by making obvious the sharing of artistic agency with an algorithm. I align my views with Katherine Hayles's affirmation that we have always been posthuman (1999, 291) and look at posthumanism from a non-technocentric angle, which nevertheless agrees that technology, matter, geological formations, and nature at large are powerful forces decentering the human. I follow Francesca Ferrando in her view that philosophical posthumanism does not stand on a hierarchical standpoint (2019, 58). Relations among humans and between humans and non-humans do not work in terms of higher or lower levels of alterity (58). Posthuman subjectivity, as Rosi Braidotti tells us, moves beyond humanist exceptionalism "to include the relational dependence on multiple non-humans and the planetary dimension as a whole" (2019, 87). Following this logic, I view the self as embedded in the environment, which is "not located somewhere out there, but is always the very substance of ourselves" (Alaimo 2010, 4). Our being-in-the-world is contaminated yet relational; it has no self-contained units or individuals and is rather made of encounter-based collaborations (Tsing 2015, 33-34), calling for an ethical response to the multiple crises of our times.

My operational concepts of subjectivity and identity are inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogue, and I describe subjectivity as a dynamic dialogical unit, and identity as a series of narrative programs that support it (Zima 2015, 10-11). At the same time, thinking with Karen Barad, I see dialogue not as mere instances of language, but rather as discursive practices that are "material (re)configurings of the world through which boundaries, properties, and meanings are differentially enacted" (2007, 139). That is to say, our presence in the world is agential in itself, and it is through specific intra-actions, or agential cuts, that phenomena come to matter – in both senses of the word (Barad 2007, 140). I thus define subjectivity and identity as dialogically enacted, discursively embodied in matter and materially embedded in dialogue.

When thinking of current technological developments, we can envision our subjectivities and identities as emerging through constant interaction with algorithms. In her study of AI, Luciana Parisi explains that our scientific understanding of intelligence must be socially mediated, embedded and determined by the sociotechnical meanings of artificial thinking (2019, 92). With machine learning, algorithms "are no longer mere instructions but are rather performative of instructions"; as such, "[a]lgorithms learn: they adapt, adjust and evolve their behaviour according to a qualitative synthesis of vast quantities of data," resulting in new modes of cognition, logical thinking and reasoning (94). Therefore, we could argue that as humans and algorithms deepen their interaction, "[t]he algorithm takes on a life of its own, but it also takes on our lives, to the extent that we can begin talking of algorithmic life itself and its conditions across its many instantiations in the world" (Goldberg and Ng 2018, 26). Although

built by humans, algorithms play an active role in shaping human consciousness. Our identities – the ways we perceive and narrate ourselves – are materially embedded and emerge in constant dialogue with human and non-human agents. Thus, if algorithms have become so deeply entrenched in our minds, why not collaborate with them?

Methodology: Diverting, Misappropriating, Hijacking

My method for developing artwork with the Midjourney Bot is inspired by Guy Debord and the Situationist International's concept of *détournement.* In *The Society of the Spectacle* ([1967] 2014), Debord foresaw how capitalist society would be dominated by images and a general shift from "having" to "appearing" (4). This principle still seems to hold, with the difference that, unlike in the author's time when the separation between cultural producers and their audiences was "the alpha and the omega of the spectacle" (8), new walls are now rising along different lines. In fact, since the development of Web 2.0, we increasingly see algorithms connecting content creators with their audiences while drawing lines among audiences themselves through homophilic news consumption and the establishment of echo chambers (Kaufman and Santaella 2020, 8). As Debord points out, in cultural development, innovation always wins (2014, 98), and while this has also proved to be true, I shift away from his historical materialist perspective that "each result of culture pushes culture toward its own dissolution" (99). I rather follow Deleuze, asserting that "history is no less the locus of non-sense and stupidity than it is the process of sense and meaning" (1997, 208), and emphasize a notion of history as active becoming, whereby the virtual is not opposed to the real but is indeed a mode of the real in itself (208-209).

According to Debord, *détournement* "reradicalizes previous critical conclusions that have been petrified into respectable truths"; ideas improve, and *détournement* playfully problematizes quotation by decontextualizing it and turning accepted verity into critique at work in the present (2014, 109-110). Translated into English, *détournement* means diversion, misappropriation, and the act of hijacking.[2] It seems a particularly apt methodology in the context of my interaction with the Midjourney Bot, as the contingent results from feeding prompts to AI are almost certain to divert concepts, misappropriate visual inputs from the archive, and invariably hijack meaning. Yet, it is exactly this act of hijacking that makes the experiment interesting, as the output from image generation becomes the algorithm's prompt to the human, turning the raw materials of inspiration – the words of authors and scholars – into visualizations, bringing forth fresh takes on established ideas, resulting in the emergence of new, sometimes unexpected, interpretations.

In what follows, I embark on a series of visual *détournements* that engage with the core questions of this project: how does interaction between humans and algorithms influence the

emergence of new forms of posthuman identity? And what are the effects on the subject in terms of developing a certain awareness of the social and political realities that surround us? I start by engaging with Stefano Harney, Fred Moten, and Achille Mbembe in a discussion of the politics of enclosure and then elaborate on my vision of identity by bringing Bakhtin's theory of dialogue close to recurrent themes in posthumanist critique, reconfiguring concepts of subjectivity and identity through a discussion of authorship and accountability. I emphasise the materiality of our bodies by invoking Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the body without organs and counterposing it with images of colonial plunder and dispossession, finally coming to the question of ethics and the role of design practices in producing affirmative visions of our world. Mindful of technology's existence in the Anthropocene at the intersection of extraction and abstraction (Mbembe 2021, 30), I advocate for dialogue with human and non-human Others, not only as the source for the emergence of identity but also as the only way forward to navigating the complexities of our times.

Détournement #1: The Fort Has No Stable Inside or Outside

Plate I: *Enclosure*. AI-generated image created by the author on Midjourney (based on the work of Stefano Harney, Fred Moten, and Achille Mbembe)

Image prompt: /imagine a brutalist fort made of concrete standing on a hill surrounded by a large army of soldiers under a full moon night sky, with bio-punk hyperrealist style.

In this world, in the interstice between the fourth industrial revolution and the sixth extinction, we are here, together, "between the algorithmic devil and the acidified blue sea" (Braidotti, 2019, 13). We are feeling fatigued. Tensions are heightened and exacerbated by relentless polemics, and all this is creating a sense of enclosure. We are stuck inside a fort of our own making. Or are we? In their collaborative monograph, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study,* Stefano Harney and Fred Moten engage with anti-imperialist analyses of Hollywood movies, drawing attention to how the imperial settler is often portrayed as surrounded by "natives", creating the impression that colonialism is, after all, a form of defence (2013, 17). But while aggression and defence can be rhetorically inverted, the image of a surrounded fort is ontologically indisputable. "Our task is the self-defence of the surround in the face of the repeated, targeted dispossessions through the settler's armed incursion;" nevertheless, recourse to self-possession in the face of dispossession is the real danger that we are currently facing (Harney and Moten 2013, 17). We are indeed living in brutal times, as Achille Mbembe tells us ever so eloquently in his book *Brutalism* (2021).[3] By drawing a connection between architecture and politics, Mbembe shows us how they are situated at the point of articulation between materiality, corporality and immateriality (2021, 8). For him, brutalism was not just a moment in the history of architecture; it is a project that aims to transform humanity into energy (2021, 15). It is not just the architecture of this world that will be remodelled, but the actual fabric of life and all its different membranes (2021, 15). The brutality of our times, and Mbembe's references to the intersection of architecture, matter, politics and violence, inspired me to create the image in Plate I.

The Midjourney Bot lives on Discord, a messaging platform particularly dear to the gamer community, currently with a user base of over 150 million, mostly between 18 and 24 years of age.[4] If you wish to give instructions to create an image, you must start your command by typing "/imagine" into the Discord chat field and then describe what you would like the bot to design. Inspired by the works of Harney, Moten, and Mbembe, I asked the algorithm to create an image of a brutalist fort on a hill, surrounded by a large army during a full moon night, giving additional directions in terms of construction materials (concrete) and some stylistic guidelines (bio-punk, hyperrealism). The result was satisfactory as the bot followed my instructions, with the only shortcoming of creating an army that did not seem animated enough. I wondered: are they there to attack, enter, or protect the fort?

The fort is itself a powerful image representing the politics of enclosure, and looking at this image, I reflected on challenging any clear-cut distinctions between the physical inside and the outside of the fort. The fort-as-enclosure can be many things. It can be ghettos, gated communities or echo chambers. It can be Fortress Europe. But where do we stand? Let us say that we are all at the same time trapped inside and lining up outside the fort. Some of us are

sinking in the deadly Mediterranean waters; others made it inside but are marked with trauma for the rest of their lives. Yet, others are physically living inside the fort but are systematically excluded due to being queer, black or brown, neurodiverse or otherwise abled, and for other innumerable reasons. The aim of this project is not to break the walls and take hold of the fort. It follows the thought of Moten, Harney, Mbembe, and many others who tell us that we need to put an end not to the fort, but to the world that created the fort. This is a highly utopian project, and I am embarking on it together with my newfound friend, the Midjourney Bot, offering a humble beginning to a titanic effort. But we must start from somewhere. I say, let's start with dialogue.

Détournement #2: A Dialogue with the Other Within

Plate II: *The End of Dialogue*. AI-generated image created by the author on Midjourney (based on a quote by Mikhail Bakhtin)

Image prompt: /imagine "When dialogue ends, everything ends. Thus dialogue, by its very essence, cannot and must not come to an end"[5]

One of the problems I have been struggling with when reading about subjectivity and identity is the dualistic narrative we often encounter, according to which the subject is either the foundation of human thought as in modern idealism and rationalism from Descartes to Sartre, or subjugated as in Foucault and the constructivist tradition (Zima 2015, xi). In contemporary debates, "the 'disappearance of the subject' is about to become a stereotype which merely

diverts attention from the fact that nobody is actually able to define what exactly is about to disappear or has already disappeared" (2). It was in my search for a more balanced approach that I encountered Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogue, and what I found productive is that his work is antithetical to the constructivist model, but, at the same time, it does not rely on Cartesian rationalist assumptions vis-à-vis the subject (Gardiner 1992, 71-72).

When writing about "self" and "other", Bakhtin prefers the terms "author" and "hero" and highlights that people, in life as in fiction, require a dialogical interaction with others to develop a coherent image of self and engage in morally and aesthetically productive tasks (Gardiner 1992, 3). The self-as-author needs a certain empathy to allow itself to become other in relation to oneself, see oneself through the eyes of the other, and then subsequently return to itself (Renfrew, 2015, 359). Thus, the other is not seen as the constitutive outside defining the self; it is instead "subjectified" and becomes an integral part of the self. In Bakhtinian thought, relationality between the author and its characters breaks with the Enlightenment's traditional focus on the authorial voice, according to which "the fetishization of the author is nothing less than an ideological expression of forces which strive hegemonically to unify the social world" (Gardiner, 1992, 34). Bakhtin argued that through the authorial voice, the language of the elite "defines itself against the 'low' speech types found on the street, in the marketplace, and so on", attempting to "preserve the socially sealed-off quality of a privileged community", solidifying the boundary between the "legitimate" and the "illegitimate" (34). Thus, by blurring the line between self and other – the author and its characters – and allowing for a plurality of voices within the self, we can see the emergence of a politically aware and relational type of subjectivity. While Bakhtin's work is still situated within the Humanist tradition, it has in it the seed of a posthuman interpretation of identity, what Braidotti defines as an identity that "turns away from self-focus and toward a threshold of active becoming" (2019, 165). That active becoming, I believe, must take shape through an active dialogue with the Other within.

As I feed Bakhtin's quote to the Midjourney Bot, I am curious to see how it will interpret the end of dialogue, a threat we constantly face in our world of border walls and echo chambers. The result of my prompt is quite stunning: a monochrome world where two people stand still in the midst of a storm, surrounded by two wall-like structures covered by printed documents, some thrown on the ground, others flying in the wind (Plate II). Is this a random creation – what tech experts would call an algorithmic "hallucination" (Klein 2023) – or a warning to the human by a non-human friend?

Détournement #3: The Author's Characters Have Risen Up

Plate III: *The Monkey.* AI-generated image created by the author on Midjourney (based on a quote by Paul B. Preciado and the works of Michel Foucault and Mikhail Bakhtin)

Image prompt: /imagine "the monkey is not our other, but rather points the way to the horizon of the democracy still to come",[6] futuristic city, Ghost in the Shell style, crowds, 8K

I was fascinated by Bakhtin's encounter with the Midjourney Bot and its interpretation of authorship and subjectivity, and this naturally led my thoughts towards the work of Michel Foucault, who views the author as a "historically given function" and a product of ideology (1998, 222). In his own words:

> Although, since the eighteenth century, the author has played the role of the regulator of the fictive, a role quite characteristic of our era of industrial and bourgeois society, of individualism and private property, still, given the historical modifications that are taking place, it does not seem necessary that the author function remain constant in form, complexity, and even existence. I think that, as our society changes, at the very moment when it is in the process of changing, the author function will disappear. (222)

Although Foucault's concept of authorship fully grasps its contingency and constructed nature, I feel that the critical question of accountability remains unexplored within this view. Thus, my very own Bakhtinian *détournement* of Foucault would read as follows: It does not seem necessary that the author function 'remains in charge'. I think that, as our society changes, at

the very moment when it is in the process of changing, 'the characters will rise up and claim their own authorial voice'.

Let us take this one step further. If the author has now lost its authority and its characters have risen, why not include non-human authorial voices in a newly revised posthuman polyphony? Let us agree with Braidotti:

> We need a subject position worthy of our times. This means to prioritize issues linked to social justice, ethical accountability, sustainability and to trans-species and intergenerational solidarity […] By 'posthumanizing' subjectivity, it can be re-positioned as a dynamic convergence phenomenon across the contradictions of posthumanism and post-anthropocentrism. Highlighting the advantages and potentials of this shift of perspective helps develop a suitable ethical framework to do justice to its multi-layered complexity. (2019, 89)

Rather than the author, it might be its cast of often left-out characters who will inspire us to take up new, ethically and politically charged positions, or emerging forms of posthuman identity, in the multi-layered complexity of our ever-changing social assemblages. But are we ready to accept co-authorship with non-human friends and 'together' build new accountable subject positions?

In his book *An Apartment on Uranus*, Paul B. Preciado brings our attention to the limits of contemporary identitarian discourse:

> Today in Europe, we face a comparable reduction in rebellious energies into identarian blocks resulting from colonial epistemologies. As feminists or activists fighting for the rights of queer, trans, and non-binary people, we are constantly invited to take a stand against a so-called homophobic Islam, women who wear veils, but also non-Western cultures which supposedly bear an ancestral form of machismo. The forces of financial capitalism and those of identitarian nationalism are the real heirs of hetero-colonial politics, and are once again trying to divide us and turn us against each other. (2019, 82-83)

In Preciado's essay, protesters at a demonstration against marriage equality in France insulted a Black female politician by calling her a monkey, holding up a sign that said: "Why not marry monkeys?" (83). "In all these insults, the figure of the monkey works as an abject signifier that serves, by comparison, to exclude migrants, racialized bodies, and queers from humanity, and by extension from the national political framework" (83). These thoughts inspired me to wake up my friend, the Midjourney Bot, to whom I prompted the following quote: "The monkey is not our other, but rather points the way to the horizon of the democracy still to come" (Preciado, 2019, 84). I then added in a few more keywords: "futuristic city", "Ghost in the Shell style", "crowds", and "8K".

The image created by the Midjourney Bot (Plate III) features a composition where the monkey is shown as a leader overseeing a large crowd. It is also represented as a cyborg, with red laser eyes and technologically enhanced ears, juxtaposed with a crowd of zombie-like humans. The "human" authorial hand is thus decentered from the narrative. This rendition heightened my awareness that the hand penning the disturbing words "Why not marry

monkeys?" in Preciado's story is not just a product of racist discourse. Following my Bakhtinian *détournement* of Foucault, this authorial voice is decentered, but dialogical interaction with its characters makes it accountable for its hateful rhetoric. And the good news is that the monkey, the author's character and abject signifier, has risen and taken its own authorial voice. It tells its once master and deviant author that his days are numbered and that the abject are not demanding to be included in the kingdom of Man; they are ready to "embrace the animality to which they are often compared" (Preciado, 2019, 85). Through interaction with the Midjourney Bot, this story gained a new life in my thoughts, inspiring fresh takes on authorship, author-character relationality, and accountability. Nevertheless, while dialogue with my algorithmic friend and the works of these authors helped me get closer to a view of subjectivity and identity that allows for a better definition of human agency, there is still an elephant in the room: the body and its flesh, the very materiality of our existence. We may need another *détournement.*

Détournement #4: The Body Without Organs and the Cabinet of Curiosities

Plate IV: *The Body Without Organs and the Cabinet of Curiosities.* AI-generated images by the author on Midjourney (based on the works of Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Achille Mbembe, and James Clifford)

Image prompt: /imagine the body without heart liver lungs kidneys stomach and the cabinet of curiosities

In his essay "Needs Identity?," Stuart Hall gives a detailed account of how Foucault ran into a dead end when his theory of subjectivity failed to provide a viable account of human agency, resulting in criticisms of being an "empty formalism" that cannot explain how subjects take different positions in their interaction with discourse (2000, 23). Although acknowledging that, in his later years, Foucault attempted to reapproach the question of agency through a phenomenology of the subject and a genealogy of what he calls "technologies of the self" (26), Hall tells us that Foucault's invocation of the body as the point of application of disciplinary practice brings a "displaced or misplaced concreteness" – a residual materiality – to try to resolve the unspecified relationship between the subject, the individual and the body (24). In Hall's own words:

> To put it crudely, it pins back together or 'sutures' those things which the theory of the discursive production of subjects, if taken to its limits, would irretrievably fracture and disperse. I think that 'the body' has acquired a totemic value in post-Foucauldian work precisely because of this talismanic status. It is almost the only trace we have left in Foucault's work of a 'transcendental signifier'. (24)

Thus, to avoid the "talismanic effect" described by Hall, we should remind ourselves that Foucault's concept of the body is not a body in its full enfleshment but rather an abstract product of discourse. Let us look at another construction of the body that comes closer to actual materiality: the body without organs. In their monograph *A Thousand Plateaus,* Deleuze and Guattari call upon us to make a body without organs (1987, 149) to scramble the codes and resist the highly ideological interpretations of psychanalysis and other technologies of power, constructing a "field of immanence of desire" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 154). According to Patricia Pisters, the body without organs points to an understanding of the body that brings together the human and the non-human, making transversal connections among species and with intelligent machines and the non-organic world of vibrant matter (2018, 74). Pisters writes:

> The body without organs suggests that we did not have to wait for prosthetic machines, extensions of men by technology, to understand that the 'scrambling of the codes' is first and for all connected to a desire and fundamental need to deliver our automatic reactions and habitual self-contained forms of subjectivity. In acknowledging our deep and ever-changing transversal connections to all other entities on the earth, the body without organs proposes indeed that we have always been posthuman. (76)

Here, while agreeing with Pisters's logic, I would argue that "our transversal connections to all entities on the earth" need to be further spelt out to include what Mbembe calls the practices of demolishing, fracturing, breaking, plundering and crushing, which are at the core of the political meaning of brutalism (2021, 12). In this context, Mbembe tells us how it took him some time to understand that practices of demolition were becoming a means to regulate life (13). What initially had looked like specific characteristics of the postcolony started to lose their singularity, and the scale of this plot went well beyond the African continent, which was just a laboratory of planetary upheaval (Mbembe 2021, 13-14). Since the time of this realization, Mbembe has

dedicated himself to a reflection on the becoming-planetary of the African predicament, and of the becoming-African of the world (2021, 14). As I was reading this, the thought of counterposing the body without organs to the cabinet of curiosities came to my mind.

The cabinet of curiosities is a concept typically connected with colonialism, plunder, collection of the exotic, and the pursuit of scientific enquiry for the sake of classifying the Other, putting it into categories to be organized and exhibited in museums resembling burglars' mansions. According to James Clifford, in early modernity, the cabinet of curiosities "jumbled everything together, with each individual object standing metonymically for a whole region or population", each collection becoming a microcosm or a summary of the universe (1988, 227). By the end of the 19th century, objects ceased to be seen primarily as "curiosities" and became witness to what was perceived as an earlier stage of human culture, "a common past confirming Europe's triumphant present" (Clifford 1988, 228). The cabinet of curiosities is, therefore, a concept with a certain complexity, visually stimulating, encapsulating both the beauty and the brutality of fascination. So, I asked myself, what would happen if I instructed the Midjourney Bot to create images based on the prompt "the body without organs and the cabinet of curiosities"?

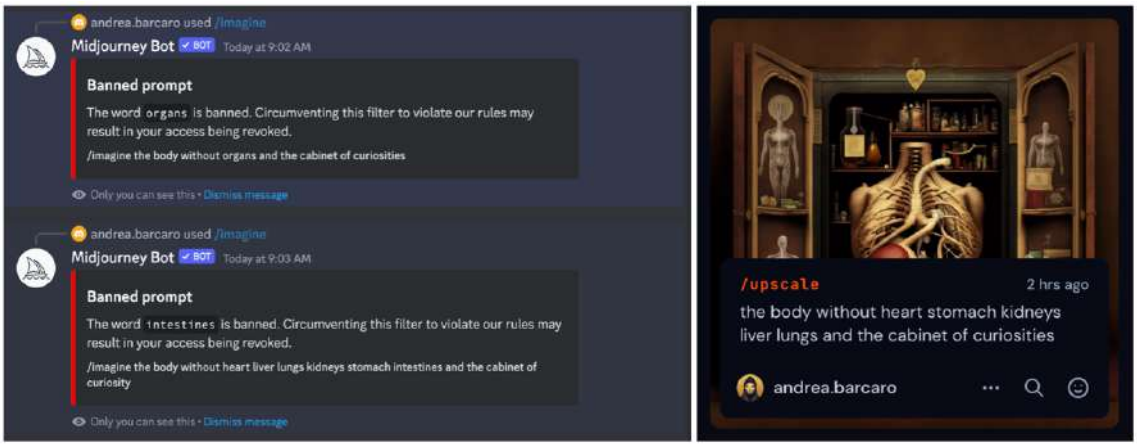

Plate V: *Banned Prompt.* Screenshot from Discord interface (left) and upscaled image with prompt (right)

I was quite surprised at how my algorithmic friend refused to collaborate. After putting my prompt through Discord, I received the message: "The word 'organs' is banned. Circumventing this filter to violate our rules may result in your access being revoked" (Plate V, left). I then instinctively thought, let's circumvent! I operated a *détournement* on my original prompt: "The body without heart liver lungs kidneys stomach intestines and the cabinet of curiosities" but was told that the word "intestines" was also banned. I said to myself: how ironic it is that some organs are blocked while others are not, and went on with the same prompt minus the banned

word (Plate V, right). The Midjourney Bot eventually gave me a choice of four visually stunning images (Plate IV).

I was quite impressed with the results of this collaboration with the Midjourney Bot, as the images are dense with meaning, and have successfully brought together the materiality and enfleshment of the body with the spoils of colonial plunder in the form of exotic stuffed animals, plants, books, and strange liquids inside of glass bottles. This gave visual form to my understanding that our consciousness is indeed not separable from the interrelation of human and algorithmic life. Our identities, the narrative programmes that support our subjectivity, emerge from a constant, deep and fraught interaction between human and non-human agents; they are deeply enfleshed in the body without organs and engraved in the cabinet of curiosities. But what does this exactly mean in terms of agency? If we constitute ourselves in endless dialogical interaction with the Other within, how does this shape our ability to shape the world around us? Let us look into the world of vibrant matter.

Détournement #5: The Anthropocene Imperative

Plate VI: *Angkor Wat and the Anthropocene Imperative.* AI-generated image by the author on Midjourney (based on the works of Donna Haraway, Karen Barad, Joanna Zylinska, and Arturo Escobar)

Image prompt: /imagine Angkor Wat on a mangrove with long roots on water, pluriverse design, 8K photography

Having established the subject's accountability by opening it up for dialogical interaction with its human and non-human others, we have stressed the materiality and enfleshment of the body in connection to imperial plunder through a reading of the body without organs and the cabinet of curiosities. What remains to be explored is the extent to which we are able to materialize what Donna Haraway describes as our "response-ability", our ability to "become-with" our ontologically heterogeneous partners in relational material-semiotic worlding practices (2016, 12-13). At this point, it may be useful to challenge once more the purely semiotic understanding of discursive practices that came to us through poststructuralism and the linguistic turn.

According to Karen Barad, "the material and the discursive are mutually implicated in the dynamics of intra-activity" (2007, 152). Subjectivity is thus discursively embodied in matter and materially embedded in discourse; it emerges from intra-actions that start at the sub-atomic level and are pervasive in the human body and the environments in which it is embedded. Matter is agency itself; it entails entanglements, causality, dynamics, and topological reconfigurings (Barad 2007, 160). It is not something that humans or even non-humans have or lack – it is not a binary opposition; it constitutes humans and non-humans in their interactions with the world (Barad 2007, 172). Following this logic, Barad tells us that "we are an agential part of the material becomings of the universe" (Barad 2007, 178). We are materially embodied and embedded in the world in which we live, and every action we perform is ethically charged.

In her book *AI Art*, Zylinska operates a *détournement* on the meaning of "AI", asking us to see it as standing not just for Artificial Intelligence but also for the Anthropocene Imperative, calling on humans to respond to our multiple crises while there is still time (2020, 40). Silicon Valley and its spin doctors are in fact avoiding the problem by reverse-engineering extinction via AI, to "Make Man Great Again" (Zylinska 2020, 40). Still, extinction is far more than a technical problem and requires a robust ethical response. So, if we follow Zylinska in thinking of AI both in terms of Artificial Intelligence and the Anthropocene Imperative, how can this double interpretation of a single acronym be of help in creating productive alternatives to the way we live? And is there any scope for our collaboration with algorithms to guide new design practices that promote affirmative visions of our world?

Pondering these questions, I decided to interact again with the Midjourney Bot. As I started typing prompts using the word "Anthropocene", I kept receiving back dystopic images of flooded cities, crumbling buildings, and urban landscapes covered in rubble. Clearly, the human archive feeding knowledge to the bot is well aware of our current environmental crisis. But I did not want to succumb to visions of doom and decided instead to look into the work of Arturo Escobar. I was inspired by his interpretation of the mangrove, which he describes as a primary example of relational ontologies (Escobar 2018, 70). In his words:

> The mangrove-world is enacted minute by minute, day by day, through an infinite set of practices carried out by a multiplicity of beings and life forms, involving complex weavings of water, minerals, degrees of salinity, forms of energy (sun, tides, moon), human activity, spiritual beings, and so forth. There is a rhizome-like logic to these entanglements, very difficult to map and measure, if at all; this logic reveals an altogether different way of being and becoming in territory and place. (Escobar 2018, 70)

Escobar shares Haraway's views that natures, cultures, subjects and objects do not pre-exist their relations, or their intertwined worldings (Escobar 2018, 70; Haraway 2016, 13). He counterposes the mangrove to the plantation, telling us that the latter replaces diversity, heterogeneity, and entangled worlds of forests and communities with a capitalist-oriented agro-industrial complex (Escobar 2018, 70-71). Indeed, as Mbembe reminds us in his book *Out of the Dark Night*, slavery and colonization are the ancient yet recent roots of capitalism, and the plantation, like the factory, and the colony, were the principal laboratories for experiments in the authoritarian destiny of the world as we know it today (2021b, 71). With all this in mind, I reformulated my prompt to the Midjourney Bot.

I thought of one of the most extraordinary places that I have visited so far, the ancient Cambodian temple complex of Angkor Wat. It came to my mind due to its much-photographed buildings overgrown with trees, their roots intertwined with 12th-century stone architecture. The effect of the jungle half taking over man-made buildings carries the beauty of a foretelling of nature. Could this be a future Manhattan, the Colosseum, or Tiananmen Square? I purposely asked the bot to transpose Angkor Wat into a mangrove setting, and the resulting entanglement of ancient architecture with nature did not bear any of the dystopian images of the Anthropocene (Plate VI). On the contrary, a tree stands tall in its full glory at the centre of the image, perhaps reminding us that no matter how much damage we inflict on the Earth, it will still impassively flourish beyond our extinction.

The Midjourney Bot, properly guided with suitable references, can therefore contribute valuable inspiration to the human. As I prompt it with scholarly concepts and quotes, the algorithm subtly prompts me back in unexpected ways. And this has something relevant to say about design practices, and how our prosthetic relation to AI can be productive, rather than just a threat to creativity and art. I agree with Jaron Rowan and Marta Camps when they contend that, in posthumanism, "[w]e aim to displace the human whilst publishing academic articles with clear human authors who claim to have original ideas" (2023, 573). We displace the role of the human but re-centre the role of the designer, only verbally challenging the modernist idea of the designer as a demiurge while describing them as a world-maker, which is itself a typical humanist conception (Rowan and Camps 2023, 573). We can thus agree with Escobar when he observes that design is politico-ontological in nature (2018, 1). Design needs to be liberated from the homogenising power of Eurocentric notions of progress and relocated into a pluriverse of onto-epistemic formations; at the same time, relationality must involve more

than post-dualism and a deconstruction of the human, in order to release the full potential of the human as a political project (Escobar 2018, 21). Ontology, design, and politics must work together as relational aspects of world-making, where the autonomy of different epistemic traditions is seen as an expression of their radical interdependence (Escobar 2018, 21). Perhaps, following this stream of thought, we could define design as a mangrovian practice, with its constant weaving of inspiration, knowledge, and dialogue, hopefully, alimented by ethical and sustainable practices, open-ended rather than constrained by extraction and abstraction, or the capitalist logic of the plantation, where the appropriation and dispossession of ideas are presented to us as an ethics of commercial copyrights.

Conclusions: The Surround

As creativity – the "last bastion of human exceptionalism" – comes under siege, we must ask ourselves where we stand. In my experiment of "doing ethics as/in fiction" (Zylinska, 2020, 31), I have presented the image of the fort as a symbol of the politics of enclosure, but also as material evidence of a struggle. It is a hard and tangible contested core, yet something ultimately destined to disappear; an idea perhaps not too different from Foucault's often-quoted image of the face of man drawn in sand at the edge of the sea, waiting to be washed away by the waves of history (2002, 422). It is not the fort that we should defend, but rather the surround of the fort (Harney and Moten 2013, 17), those sands and waves that will ultimately shape the fort – and with it the destiny of humanity – just like the roots of the trees that mould the structure of the temple buildings at Angkor. Still, we are not just at the mercy of our destiny. We are ethical beings, and "ethics cannot be about responding to the other as if the other is the radical outside of the self. Ethics is not a geometrical calculation; 'others' are never far from 'us'; 'they' and 'we' are co-constituted and entangled through the very cuts 'we' help to enact" (Barad 2007, 178-179). At times inside the fort, at others lining up outside its walls, facing the settler's repeated dispossessions, let us not be blinded by the politics of critique. As Harney and Moten describe it: "Critique endangers the sociality it is supposed to defend, not because it might turn inward to damage politics, but because it would turn to politics and turn outward, from the fort to the surround" (2013, 19). We should not unquestioningly rely on the genteel logic of critique but rather engage in a never-ending dialogue with the self as the Other within, an honest and open dialogue with all our human and non-human friends, including algorithms, nature, and – like it or not – even those CEOs of Silicon Valley.

Notes

[1] Midjourney (https://www.midjourney.com) is a generative artificial intelligence (AI) program and service that allows users to create AI-generated images by interacting with an algorithm, the

Midjourney Bot, on a server hosted on the instant messaging platform Discord (https://www.discord.com). Users give the algorithm textual prompts and receive back images based on these prompts, with four versions to choose from. They can then upscale their favourite images until reaching satisfaction, and use the final versions as their own artwork.

[2] https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/french-english/detournement

[3] The monograph's English translation is forthcoming in early 2024. In this article, I refer to its Portuguese translation: *Brutalismo,* published by Antígona, Lisbon.

[4] https://techpenny.com/discord-user-demographics/ (last accessed on 12th September 2023)

[5] Bakhtin, quoted in Gardiner 1992, 25.

[6] Preciado 2019, 84.

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Andrea Barcaro is a freelance writer and communication professional with an interest in the intersection between culture, identity, and posthumanism. Through his writing, he questions contemporary constructions of European identity vis-à-vis issues of gender and race, and processes of migration and decolonization, aiming at the creation of productive forms of subjectivity and identity. His work engages with transdisciplinarity and the connection between academic thinking, popular culture, digital media, and visual art.
E-mail: andreabarcaro@edu.ulisboa.pt

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Obia. The Bushinengués des Guyanes: political and ecological awareness in the Americas

Nicola Lo Calzo

Photographer, École nationale supérieure d-arts de Paris-Cergy

Abstract

The photographic work of Obia is part of Nicola Lo Calzo's long-term photographic project *KAM* about the living memories of colonial slavery and anti-slavery struggles. The project interrogates the fundamental bond of the Bushinengués, a Maroon community, with the earth, based on a cosmogonic and collective conception of the territory that breaks with the Eurocentric notion of "virgin forest." The Obia series reflects on the fragility of this relationship, endangered by the historical abandonment of ancestral villages, by contemporary migration towards urban centers and by the process of patrimonialisation underway towards living cultures.

Keywords

Maroon communities, afrodescendants, slavery, resistance, memory, ancestral land

In the Guiana region, in an area called the "Guiana Plateau" which extends between Suriname and French Guiana, there are Maroon communities, descendants of fugitive slaves who fled the Dutch plantations in the 17th century to find refuge in the forest: the Bushinengués. Their languages, rituals, practices and knowledge are evidence of the specific relationship that these peoples have been able to build with nature from *Fesiten*, in the Saamak language "the early times," until today. In this regard, the photographic work of Obia, which is part of my long-term photographic project *KAM* about the living memories of colonial slavery and anti-slavery struggles, interrogates this fundamental bond with the earth, based on a cosmogonic and collective conception of the territory that breaks with the Eurocentric notion of "virgin forest." The forest to the Bushinengués is refuge, a natural, historical and social space, a place of sociability and creation where a particular vision of the world is produced. In this regard, the Obia series – "Obia" is originally an Akan word, referring to a belief system developed by Maroon peoples since their arrival from West Africa – reflects precisely on the fragility of this relationship, endangered by the historical abandonment of ancestral villages, by contemporary migration towards urban centers and by the process of patrimonialisation underway towards living cultures.

Six groups of Maroons inhabit Suriname and French Guiana today: the Saamaka, the Ndyuka, the Aluku, the Pamaka, the Matawai and the Kwinti. These peoples, like Native Americans, find themselves facing complex challenges related to the transmission of their heritage in a "republican" society that promotes integration into urban models, without being able to take into account the specificities of Bushinengué cultures, nor their claims as indigenous populations of the Amazon.

On the French side, the judicial system does not recognize minorities and indigenous populations as legal entities. France has not signed Convention No. 169 relating to the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples. They justify it by invoking republican principles. On the Surinamese side, despite the ruling of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in 2007, which granted the Maroons, in particular the Saamaka group, the status of indigenous people, recognizing the collective rights over their ancestral land, the state continues not to apply the Court's ruling.

In such a context, the non-recognition of the right to land goes hand in hand with the process of patrimonialisation of the Bushinengué culture, which comes across as a "facade" solution to the structural weakening of the ancestral relationship with the land and to the deterioration of the conditions of the Maroon communities. This process dates back to the colonial era and was one of the major legitimization tools of the colonial project: the shift of a knowledge or an object from the political space of the forest to the normative space of the museum sanctions its depoliticization. In these terms, on the one hand, heritage becomes a propaganda tool at the service of governments or political parties, in search of new potential voters. On the other hand, the Bushinengués continue to occupy the lowest positions of the social pyramid which, in Guiana as well as in Suriname, still remains highly racialized.

As part of an artistic residency organized by the association *La Tète dans les Images* and with the support of the Libi Na Wan association, the municipality of Saint Laurent du Maroni and some local families such as the Aboikoni family, the Ameté, the Saîfa family and the Ajintoena family, I was able to become conversant with and photograph some relevant cultural and social events within the Bushinengué community. Indeed, I attended the funeral ceremonies of the supreme leader of the Saamaka people in Saamaka country, the *Gaama* Belfon Aboikoni, which took place for a week in the village of Asindoopo, capital of the Saamaka community, in the ancestral lands of the Saamaka people, exposed to the pressure of international concessions.

During the time I spent in Charvein with the Ndyuka Ajintoena family, I was able to photograph a Komenti ceremony. Forest context and urban environment are the scene of different cultural practices and new configurations. If some original villages still host the traditional authority (this is the case of the village of Asindoopo, capital of the Saamaka), others are more recent, often originating as refugee camps during the civil war in Suriname, such as

the village of Charvein, home to the Ndyuka families who survived the Moiwana massacre. On the other hand, in the urban context, where the majority of the Bushinengué population, largely educated and evangelized, lives today, the knowledge of the Bushinengués, their pharmacopoeia, their medicinal practices, including the practice of Obia, are increasingly 'institutionalized'. This process is encouraged by local associations and public initiatives, such as the Charbonnière festival in Saint Laurent du Maroni and "Maroon Day" in Albina.

It is precisely considering these challenges that the photographs presented here reflect on the contribution of the Bushinengués to the resistance struggles against slavery, on the complexity of their living heritage, which transcends the political and administrative boundaries dictated by colonial history, and on the contribution of these peoples to the development of a political and ecological consciousness in the Americas.

Fig. 1. Headless, embalmed parrot. Alexandre-Franconie Departmental Museum, Cayenne, French Guiana. According to Maroon tradition, forest animals are often associated with divinity. They are considered vehicles for spirits, such as Komanti, Diadja & Opete. During colonization, these animals were studied, analyzed, ranked, and finally, placed at the service of colonial propaganda to show the richness and biodiversity of French Guiana. Some of these animals are now preserved at the former colonial museum Alexandre-Franconie, Cayenne, French Guiana.

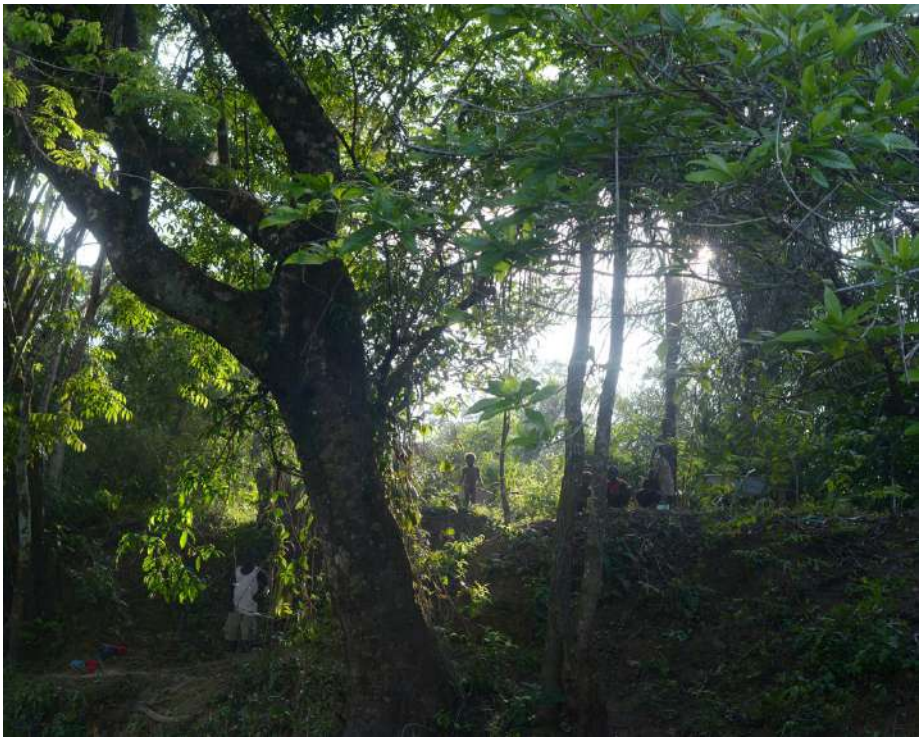

Fig. 2. The Daume Village entrance, Saamaka territory, Suriname River, Suriname. This village, at the bottom of the Suriname river, is named after the kingdom of Dahomey, in present-day Benin. The people living along the river say that all access for *bakaa* (white or western people) is strictly forbidden. The Dahomey Kingdom played an important role in the development of European slave trade in West Africa, fueling the European demand for slaves from the 17th to the 19th century.

Fig. 3. Suriname river rapids, dry season, Saamaka territory, Suriname. The Maroons are river experts. Since the 17th century, river transport has been their monopoly. They know all the river dangers at different times of the year, depending on the changing depth of the water. Maroons have named each rock, rapid, and other river elements with proper names, transferred orally, generation by generation. The river is a geographical space but it is also a mental space, a place of memory, a *genius loci*.

Fig. 4. Molenn Pansa, *basia* (assistant headman) and warehouse keeper giving the departure signal of the *Gaama* (chief) coffin towards its secret, forest, tomb site. *Gaama* Belfon Aboikoni's funeral, Asindoopo, Saamaka territory, Suriname. The *Gaama* funeral is the most important event in the cultural and religious life of the Maroon people. At the top of the hierarchy is the *Gaama*, the head of the community. Since the 50's, the three last *Gaama* have been belonging to Aboikoni family, now challenged by the other clans. On this occasion, family members come to their native village from neighboring villages, as well as from major regional cities, such as Paramaribo, Saint Laurent du Maroni and Kourou. The celebrations last a week, according to a precise timetable. Guns play an important symbolic role. They refer to their dead chief's warrior value, and to struggles of resistance and wars against white settlers. They are also proof of the relationship of exchange that has existed with the settlers since the beginning.

Fig. 5. A 19th century tortoise shell. Alexandre-Franconie Departmental Museum, Cayenne, French Guiana. According to Maroon tradition, forest animals are often associated with divinity. They are considered vehicles for spirits, such as Komanti, Diadja and Opete. During colonization, these animals were studied, analyzed, ranked, and finally, placed at the service of colonial propaganda to show the richness and biodiversity of French Guiana. Some of these animals are now preserved at the former colonial museum Alexandre-Franconie, Cayenne, French Guiana.

Fig. 6. The *Fraka-tiki* (in Bushinengué, “pole with a flag”), the ancestors’ altar from the village of Asindoopo, Suriname, 2014.

Fig. 7. Groupe of Captain women showing their decorated textiles at the funeral ceremonies in the Asindoopo village. In the middle Captain Alele Amoida, *Booko de* (the day before the burial), Saamaka territory, Suriname. They wear skirts held by a kind of scarf (folded into a triangle shape) with embroidered texts in tribute to the deceased. Women's textile arts, produced as exchange gifts for a husband or lover or for special events such as a burial, have transformed greatly as access to trade cotton from the coast has increased. Trends in fashion change quickly, utilizing elaborate embroidery, appliqué, and patchwork, with women freely borrowing from others while making it their own.

Fig. 8. Albert Aboikoni's speech (Belfon Aboikoni's successor), in front of dignitaries and government officials, *Booko-de*, or the burial vigil, Asindoopo, Suriname. Despite the fact that Albert Aboikoni was nominated Belfon Aboikoni's successor by the Aboikoni family, many captains and *basia* do not agree with his nomination.

Fig. 9. Tablet Amoida & Glenn carry the oracle. The *Gaama* spirit directs where they go, Asindoopo, Saamaka territory, Suriname. “Corpse divination (the questioning of the deceased’s spirit in which the corpse bearers’ movements, anxious to reveal the cause of death, are “controlled” by the spirit) was widespread as part of funeral rites in West and Central Africa. It is found again in widely separated parts of colonial Afro-America – from Jamaica to Dominica to Suriname. Corpse “divination” was probably familiar to most of the first slaves.” Sidney Wilfred Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1976, 55-56.

Fig. 10. On a village canoe, Aboikoni family members dance and celebrate their dead chief. During these performances, the canoe circles around and around several times. As a part of the ritual, this is a way to represent the hesitations of the deceased’s soul

Fig. 11. The sacred sail, symbol of the chief ‘s power, Asindoopo, Saamaka territory, Suriname. The sail is to honour the *Gaama*. In general, if a grown up person passes away, this sail is always used. It doesn't have to be blue, it can also have another colour (not black, white or red).

Fig. 12. Pascal with a parrot, participant in the *Gaama* Aboikoni funeral in Suriname. He lives in Kourou in French Guiana.

Fig. 13. Girl supporters dance with Ronnie Brunswick, ex-rebel leader of the Jungle Commando, Maroon Day, October 10, 2014, Albina, Suriname. Every year, Ronnie Brunswick, ex-rebel Maroon leader of the Jungle Commando, today chairman of the Surinamese political party ABOP, is the most expected star at Maroon day. Despite his ambiguous relationship with power, he still remains the star guest of this holiday and is considered as much a living myth as past heroes. On October 10, the Maroon and other communities such as Amerindians or Creole gather on the Albina main square to enjoy traditional music, folk dance, and local beer. Political speeches are an important part of the day. Government and party leaders, such as Ronnie Brunswick, get on stage and speak, mixing political issues, Maroon history and humor.

Fig. 14. The Maroon Day, a national holiday established in 1974 to commemorate the Maroon people in Suriname and French Guiana, 10 October 2014, Albina, Suriname. 2014.

Fig. 15. Maroon girl, Ismelda Sevetia, wearing a hairdressing with Suriname flag's colors. Maroon Day, October 10, 2014, Albina, Suriname. From the first Maroon Day in Suriname, letters were written to successive governments to give land rights to the Maroons and Indigenous people – but to no avail. Despite the verdict of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in 2007, which grants to the Maroons the "indigenous people status" and recognizes their right to ancestral land, Suriname continues to ignore the Court's decision. Paradoxically, in 2010, the new President, Dersi Bouterse, approved Maroon Day as a Surinamese holiday.

Fig. 16. Maroon children play on Maroon Day, October 10, 2014, Albina, Suriname.

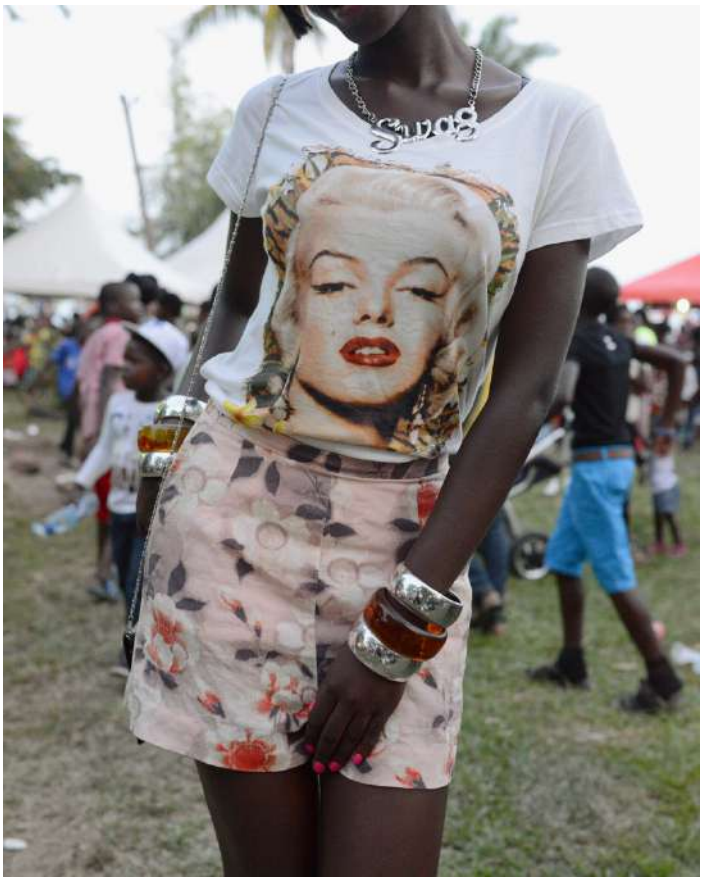

Fig. 17. A young Ndjuka girl poses with a Marilyn Monroe t-shirt, Maroon Day celebrations, October 10, 2014.

Fig. 18. Anne-Marie Javouhey's former leprosarium, used for Surinamese Maroon refugees during the civil war in Suriname from 1986 to 1991, under control of the French army.

Fig. 19. Adrien is from one of the most Maroon famous families, called Ajeantona, and well-known because a survivor of the Moiwana's massacre, during the Surinamese Civil War. The massacre took place on November 29, 1989. The Surinamese army, while in search of the guerrilla leader, Ronnie Brunswick, attacked the village and killed thirty-five people, mostly women and children. They say that the Ajintoena family managed to escape the massacre through the Obia, and its warrior powers were reactivated as in the days of marronnage. Adrien was two at the time of the massacre. Today he is the heir to the family memory kept by his grandmother, Ajintoena. He claims he is an Obiaman and he is invited regularly to take part in national celebrations such as "Maroon Day."

Fig. 20. Adrien Ajintoena in trance during the Komenti ceremony, Village of Charvein, French Guiana. For the Bushinengués, the memory of Marronnage and its accompanying resistance is enshrined in the cultural practices of a complex traditional system. Divination, ancestral worship, arts, folk tales, and Obia traditions have all been handed down to the next generation through the clan and family systems since the 17th century. Obia is originally an Akan word, specifically attributed to the Fanti and/or Ashanti. It points to a belief system developed by the Maroon peoples since the *Fesiten* – "First-Time or Time Immemorial" in Saamaka language – and has lasted till today. Obia is one of the most significant forms of living memory, in terms of resistance to colonial slavery, in 21st-century Americas.

Fig. 21. The *Fraka-tiki* (in Bushinengué, “pole with a flag”), the ancestors’ altar from the village of Chauvin, French Guiana, 2014.

Nicola Lo Calzo lives and works between Paris, West Africa and the Caribbean. His photographic practice and research investigate coloniality, decolonial representation and identity. His photographs explore minority groups’ interaction with their environment, and their strategies of survival and resistance. His work has been exhibited in museums, art centers and festivals, most notably the Macaal in Marrakesh, the Afriques Capitales in Lille, the Musée des Confluences in Lyon, the National Alinari Museum of Photography in Florence, and the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam. Lo Calzo is also a member of the editorial committee of the digital arts research platform PLARA. E-mail and site: www.nicolalocalzo.com; www.plara.fr

REVIEWS

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Jitney: Black is beautiful, and possible

Leonardo De Franceschi
Roma Tre University

August Wilson, *Jitney*, dir. Renzo Carbonera, Vicenza, Teatro Astra, 12 May 2023

ABSTRACT
The premiere of August Wilson's *Jitney*, directed by Renzo Carbonera at the Teatro Astra of Vicenza on 12 May 2023, is part of a larger project promoted by *La Piccionaia* Center in Vicenza, with the support of the US Consulate General in Milan, in collaboration with the August Wilson Legacy, Pittsburgh University, and Padua University. The premiere was a historical event, not only because it was the very first time that an Italian theatre had hosted an August Wilson play in Italian, but it was also the first time a cast made up only of Black Italian actors performed on stage. The quality of their performance confirmed that there is a sizable number of very good black actors trained in the most prestigious Italian schools and that the only thing that separates them from everyone else is opportunity.

Keywords
August Wilson, *Jitney*, Black Italian actors, Black English, Italian translation

On 12 May 2023, the *Teatro Astra* in Vicenza witnessed the historical premiere of August Wilson's *Jitney*, directed by Renzo Carbonera: it was the very first time that an Italian theatre had hosted a play written by the greatest African American playwright, a performance with a cast made up of Black Italian actors. For this review, my only expertise derives from familiarity with the Black Italian acting scene, to which I dedicated my edited volume *L'Africa in Italia* (Aracne, 2013) and the blog *Cinemafrodiscendente* (2014-20). Additionally, I had the privilege to be present at the session of open rehearsals at *Carrozzerie n.o.t.* on 4 April and at the premiere in Vicenza.

August Wilson (1945-2005) is known as the "theater's poet of Black America." Twice winner of the Pulitzer Prize, in 1987 for *Fences* and in 1990 for *The Piano Lesson*, Wilson left us the unique heritage of the American Century Cycle – a series of ten plays documenting poetically the African American experience in the 20th century, where he addresses issues such as exploitation, racism, identity, as seen through the Hill District, the Black suburb in Pittsburgh where he was born and raised. In his outstanding and controversial speech in 1996, *The Ground on Which I Stand*, Wilson described his search for universality through the great tradition of Western Theater, from Aeschylus to Ibsen through Shakespeare. At the same time,

he pronounced words of fire against an American scene which was neglecting black playwrights and erasing the deep culture of African Americans through dangerous practices such as colorblind casting. Despite the prestigious awards and a massive series of successful Broadway and off-Broadway stagings, with stars such as Angela Bassett, Viola Davis, Samuel L. Jackson and Denzel Washington, in Italy, Wilson's works have never been published in translation, and his name is mainly known only as the author of *Fences*, which inspired a feature film starring and directed by Washington, which earned Wilson a posthumous Academy Award in 2017.

Set in 1977, *Jitney* was the very first play written by Wilson, and it was to be staged for the first time in 1979 but performed in a Broadway theatre only in 2017. Less celebrated than other works in the Cycle, this two-act piece is developed in the unity of place and action during two days in a station for illegal taxis run by Black drivers for an audience of Black working-class customers and housewives, in the spirit of social civil service. The station, managed by the experienced Becker in his sixties, is in the Hill District, a suburb facing massive demolition work imposed by the local administration. A long-time widower, Becker finds himself having to decide on the very same day how to deal with the order to leave the place he has run for 18 years and how to face his son Booster, coming out of prison after a long sentence for the murder of a white girl. In addition to Becker, we meet a small community of drivers, customers, and visitors for whom the station has become a reference point; everyone facing the hardships of an experience made up of ordinary violence, where the risk of ending up on the street, in jail or a coffin is high. Yet, it is nevertheless possible to fight for a better life while knowing that the American dream is meant for white people.

Introducing Wilson to an Italian audience was not an easy task as he is a renowned master of African American English – a linguistic variety that is a direct expression of the oral tradition of the Black community, rich in inflexions complex to render in Italian. The translation of *Jitney* was accomplished by Angela Soldà with a project from Padua University under the supervision of Fiona Clare Dalziel and Anna Scacchi. Soldà knew how to bet successfully on the possibility of inventing a sharp Italian street talk with no local accents. A dozen or so occurrences of the N-word, although spoken in a context of proximity and between equals, does not pass unnoticed, as also the translation of *yellow gal* with the Italian word *mulatta*, but this was likely hard to avoid.

This theatrical production is part of a far more complex project promoted by *La Piccionaia* Center in Vicenza, with the support of the US Consulate General in Milan, in collaboration with the August Wilson Legacy, Pittsburgh University, and Padua University. The Wilson Project has a rich timeline, starting from July 2022 and including several intermediate workshops through art residences and open sessions realized in partnership with other network poles in Vicenza, Padua, Codroipo (Udine), and Rome. The artistic team included the playwright Fabrizio Arcuri

and the actor coach Tindaro Granata. From April to May 2023, the project was enriched by a multimedia workshop for students attending a technical senior high school with a program of screenings and four webinars on the multiple facets of The Wilson Project. If we must find fault in the ambitious initiative produced by *La Piccionaia*, it is in the timing of the premiere, scheduled at the end of the Winter Season, in a decentered small city like Vicenza and with the calendar of following shows still in progress.

Behind the project, you can see the strong will of Renzo Carbonera, a film director in his forties born near Udine with a part-German background like Wilson and two feature films coproduced by Rai Cinema, *Resina* (2018) and *Takeaway* (2021), appreciated by critics and in the film festival circuit. Carbonera, whose encounter with Wilson's legacy took place by chance in Pittsburgh during a film tour, took a considerable risk in quite a few basic choices, starting from the cast. We have here a stock of actors who are part of the same generation, from Alessandra Arcangeli (25) to Germano Gentile (38). At the same time, in Wilson's work, there are at least two characters in their 50s and 60s (Becker, who runs the jitney station, and Doub, a driver and a Korean War veteran), and two more between 40 and 50 years of age (drivers Turbo, always meddling in the business of others, and Fielding, a former tailor with drinking issues). More than that, he gave a double role to each of the four male actors, imposing on them a challenging tour de force characterized by frequent ins and outs, add-on changes and readjustments in diction, posture, and body language. Arcangeli was cast as well in a double role, as the housewife Rena and as a mute presence at the side on the stage, magically animating to sing and play at the scene, changing some classics of soul music by Nina Simone (how to forget her *Work Song* version?) and Marvin Gaye.

While it was not inscribed in the core representative realism of Wilson's work, Carbonera's direction aims at a mix of three modes, abstraction, minimalism, and antinaturalism, with essential décor and costumes, to say the least. The scenery is dominated by the incumbent presence of two big vertical liquid crystal screens where you can see, during the action – according to Wilson's notes – Becker's *rules* and prices of rates to different parts of the city while, at scene changes, you have images of daily life from the seventies in the US. The Jitney station is materialized through a small table, a sofa, a pouffe, and a few plastic chairs. Furnishings are deliberately sparse: the fundamental handset telephone, a chess board, a few magazines and little else. Costumes, too, follow this procedure: you have ordinary, black outfits with no reference to the historical frame, with a few add-ons (Becker's hat, Booster's gloves) mainly included to help the audience distinguish between the characters, some of them shining in a brilliant primary yellow – a true hallmark of the Wilson Project's graphic layout.

The overall outcome does not disappoint expectations, with the coolness of registers of Carbonera's stage direction balanced by the tense energy of the five emerging performers,

conducted with remarkable confidence even though this was his first time as a theater director. Each of the actors stands out for a key that, in a way, links their two roles: Germano Gentile for his solid presence, enriched by a few scratchy vocal mannerisms; Aaron Tewelde for his buoyant and controlled elocution; Yonas Aregai for his attentive grading of times and tones; Maurizio Bousso for a comedic lightness that helps to overshadow a few excesses in his body language; Alessandra Arcangeli (Hallyx in the recording field) for the intense expressions of her Rena role but also the warm and captivating tone of a true rising soul star.

I wish this theatrical production would find a wide and durable place in the Italian scene, a platform traditionally closed to actors and even more so to authors of African descent. This staging confirms evidence known to those who follow the Italian acting scene without blinders. The non-news is that we do have a consistent supply of Black actors and actresses trained in prestigious schools, such as Accademia Silvio d'Amico in Roma (Arcangeli and Tewelde), Teatro di Roma (Aregay), Teatro Stabile in Genova (Bousso), Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia (Gentile, Miguel Gobbo Diaz, Haroun Fall), Paolo Grassi in Milan (Esther Elisha, Rosanna Sparapano, Marouane Zotti, and Alberto Boubakar Malanchino), Piccolo Teatro in Milan (Martina Sammarco): many of them have appeared with remarkable success on stage, films and TV mini-series. Before them came another generation of actors, now in their 40s, including Nadia Kibout, Ashai Lombardo Arop, Balkissa Maiga, and Alfie Nze. A solid background and an even richer experience are the added values of some who joined the Italian stage and film scene already in the 1980s and 1990s, from the veteran Antonio Campobasso to Felicité Mbezele, through to Salvatore Marino, Jonis Bascir and Rufin Doh Zeyenouin. Some emerging stars, such as Caterina Deregibus and Gamey Guilavogui Malatesta, have been completely forgotten. The multicultural Italy of 2023 has talent to spare; we are missing roles and courage to support a movement on its way despite everything. To misquote Viola Davis in her memorable speech on women of color at the Emmy Awards in 2015, in Italy, too, the only thing that separates actors of color from everyone else is opportunity.

Leonardo De Franceschi teaches Film History and Postcolonial Film and Media Studies at Roma Tre University. His activity, as a film scholar and promoter of film culture, has been largely dedicated to Africa and African Diasporas. His most recent books include *La cittadinanza come luogo di lotta. Le seconde generazioni in Italia fra cinema e serialità*, Aracne 2018, and *Lo schermo e lo spettro. Sguardi postcoloniali su Africa e afrodiscendenti*, Mimesis 2017. E-mail: leonardo.defranceschi@uniroma3.it

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Citizenship, Race and the Mediterranean: The Case of Italy

Pina Piccolo

Independent scholar

Camilla Hawthorne. *Contesting Race and Citizenship: Youth Politics in the Black Mediterranean.* Itacha, N.Y.: Cornell University Press 2022 (324 pages). ISBN: 978-1501762291.

ABSTRACT

Camilla Hawthorne's *Contesting Race and Citizenship: Youth Politics in the Black Mediterranean* (Ithaca N.Y. Cornell University Press, 2022, 324 pages) draws on archival research as well as the most recent scholarship in Black Diasporic studies centred on Europe, the Black Mediterranean, classical postcolonial works on the transatlantic slave trade measured against new historiography focusing on the Mediterranean's role as the first site of the plantation economy, as well as interviews with young black activists, artists and community leaders.

Its core contribution is demonstrating the inextricable connection between nation building in Italy and the definition of citizenship as exclusively tied to whiteness. The twists and turns of this basic premise are tracked over the 160 years of Italian history, including pre- and post-Fascist years, the nations' colonial ventures, the post-war period all the way to today and the rise of Black youth as an autonomous political subject raising citizenship as their *sine qua non* demand.

The final chapters speculate on the need to shift the focus of their outlook and organizing to the South, devising new ways of interacting with current migrations across the Mediterranean, thus seizing the opportunity to forge solidarity links with today's international diasporic networks as well as engaging with potential allies implied in the colonial status past and present of the *Mezzogiorno* as a whole. This shift to the South, from the current barycentre in the North where a sizeable majority of Black youth reside, is fleshed out through interviews with Black Italian youth activists and community leaders and supported by the most recent scholarship on Caribbean multi-layered realities (the framing of which Camilla Hawthorne finds akin to the racial, economic and political situation in Italy) including Yarimar Bonilla's notion of 'strategic entanglement'.

Keywords

Race, citizenship, Italy, youth, migration, colonialism, activism

Associating the verb 'contesting' to words such as 'race' and 'citizenship', as Camilla Hawthorne does in the title of her monograph *Contesting Race and Citizenship – Youth Politics in the Black Mediterranean* (Cornell University Press, 2022) may, at first sight, elicit a sort of cognitive dissonance in the reader, due to the tying together of something as bureaucratically charged and tied to the nation state as 'citizenship' and a verb signifying rebellion, or at least a challenge to the status quo, accompanied by that inconvenient sense of discomfort that permeates the air when the noun 'race' is uttered, especially in Italy. The glue that holds this

whole inconvenient assembly of words together is a demographic grouping that has garnered little autonomous attention in racism and coloniality studies in Italy: Black youth of African descent, to whose travails in finding identity, belonging and definition, not only individually but as a political subject, Camilla Hawthorne devotes a large portion of the book.

The five dense chapters plus the introduction, conclusion and coda, that constitute this highly valuable contribution to studies on racism, coloniality, diaspora and political movements in Italy and their implication for transnational networks of diasporic solidarity based in the Mediterranean make this a highly generative work, that has deep implications for studies of the European south. The monograph contains in fact the seeds for further extensive research on several of the core topics it explores, from color-blindness to ethnonationalism to the function and limits of national citizenship. Its call for "a broad and unconventional archive that includes the experiences and testimonies of activists, popular and material culture, digital media, and literature – as well as traditional historical archives that read against the grain" (Hawthorne 2022, 196) should be an inspiration for the work of a whole new generation of scholars and activists who might be less attached to 20th century ideological biases and more open to innovative methodologies and ways of bridging theory and practice, incorporating some of the insights stemming from work focusing on the specifics of the Black experience in Europe by Jacqueline Nassi Brown, David Theo Goldberg, Robin D.G. Kelley, Olivette Otele, Katherine McKittrick, and Michelle Wright.

The book's Italian translation by scholar and Black Italian-Haitian activist Marie Moïse (*Razza e cittadinanza. Frontiere contese e contestate nel Mediterraneo Nero*, Astarte edizioni, May 2023), is certain to stir more fruitful debate and soul searching both among the young Black activists the book focuses on, as well as the white postcolonial scholars and activists in the antiracist and immigrant rights movements. Hawthorne engages with the issues of defining solidarity and allyship, the tensions involved in difference, racialization, othering, and identity at a time when the liberal state and capitalism are fraying at the seams at a global level, and yet no satisfactory approach to confront the crisis appears to be forthcoming.

Among the numerous theories and concepts from Anglo-American, Caribbean and Mediterranean scholarship deployed by Camilla Hawthorne to untangle complex and duplicitous narratives and policy yarns, she introduces in the Italian / South European / Mediterranean fray, Caribbean scholar Yarimar Bonilla's idea of 'strategic entanglement' (defined as "a way of crafting and enacting autonomy within a system from which one is unable to fully disentangle", 161). Strategic entanglement is employed, for example, in the portion of the book devoted to the assistance extended to recent Eritrean arrivals from Mediterranean crossings by Milan's Porta Venezia Eritrean half-a-century old community. Hawthorne uses extensive interviews with activists Medhin Paolos and Rahel Sereke of the *Cambio Passo* association to make a distinction between solidarity projects enacted by progressive white

Italians and those of the Eritrean community, characterized by "postcolonial interconnection, diaspora and spatially extended kinship – not normative liberal European humanitarianism or neo liberal Italian voluntarism" (177).

In dialogical relation with the reader, Camilla Hawthorne starts off chronicling how her own positionality and embodied persona as a Black Italian / African American ethnologist, daughter of a white Italian mother whose own family had past colonialist entanglements, contributed to her ability to engage in terrains and access social folds typically precluded to either Anglo-American scholarship or to Mediterranean based post-colonial, race studies.

In the first part of the book, "Citizenship," readers can track her progress from an initial interest for what was then dubbed the "the Mediterranean migration crisis" to her observation of the unease it caused among many young Black Italians who were automatically associated with the recent arrivals by white Italian society at large. This then led to a reluctant acquiescence on her part to understand why a substantial portion of young Black Italians were so bent on demanding to be recognized as Italian citizens as to form a movement and express the demand in political terms, both institutionally and informally. Her own misgivings were motivated by the limitations entailed by the demand for citizenship as far as challenging the notion of the nation state was concerned, especially at a time when Fortress Europe was showing the deadliness of state boundaries, and also by its potential for creating inclusion/exclusion binaries, reinforcing the legitimacy of the State and its attendant liberal capitalism, acting therefore as a brake on more radical demands.

Having overcome this initial resistance and going against all proclamations of color blindness prevalent in Europe and especially in Italy, both among academics, white activists in the Left and the white population at large, the author doggedly pursues a route outside canonical Italian historiography and far removed from prevailing public discourse: i.e., the inextricable ties between nation building in Italy since its inception and the peculiarity of its demographics vis-a-vis continental and northern European nations, leading to the conflation of citizenship and race through numerous shifts at the level of policy and intellectual discourse (carefully tracked and detailed by the author in all their nuances in the course of a period of over 150 years). In so doing she shows the mutual construction of Italianness and whiteness, instrumental to both internal and external colonization projects well in advance of Fascism.

The book extensively addresses the manner in which Italy's Mediterranean geographic placement was often deployed to soften or evade issues of racism in the name of cosmopolitism and hybridity but actually ended up being used for purposes of exclusion. Hawthorne explores, for example, the intellectual legacy of figures like Giuseppe Sergi, who argued for the existence of a "Mediterranean race/stock" diffused from the Horn of Africa (104). Using a Google N-Gram graph, she shows variations in the frequency of the word *meticciato* in Italian texts published between 1800 and 2019, with a spike occurring between the late 30s

and early 40s, during Mussolini's efforts to outlaw *meticciato*, i.e., stamp out the 'mixing' of Italian colonialists with Eritrean and Somali women in the Horn of Africa (a practice that had been 'tolerated' or even encouraged earlier), the sharp drop in the occurrence of the word that almost disappeared in the aftermath of WWII all the way to the 2000 with a spike occurring in the 2010 when the term was newly resurrected by the mostly white antiracism movement to challenge the increasingly murderous policing of borders and proudly champion hybridity, opening up the category of Italianness (118), but perhaps underestimating a little how the term is still charged with its roots in hegemonic colonial discourse.

Southern Italy makes its appearance again toward the end of the book, where Camilla Hawthorne grapples with future prospects for the struggles of Black Italian youth who are increasingly looking *beyond* the nation state, tentatively exploring the new political formations that emerge from their own strategic entanglements not only with the politics of liberalism, but also with the more capacious African and Black Mediterranean diasporas. Relying on similarities between structural and historical aspects of the Caribbean experience and those of southern Italy, with its potential to go beyond the dualism of US understandings of racism and European assumptions of racelessness, Camilla Hawthorne draws from the work of Fatima El-Tayeb, C.R.L. James, Edouard Glissant, W.E.B. DuBois, Antonio Gramsci as well as the lived experience of activists from Castelvolturno and Palermo to analyze the prospects for reorienting the geographies of Black resistance towards a younger generation of Black Italians situated at a geographical crossroads "that has the potential to unsettle both hierarchical geographies and teleological narratives of liberalism and modernity" (187).

Out of a 300-page book, 100 of them consist of a methodology report, endnotes, bibliography, index, thus the theses Camilla Hawthorne proposes in this valuable contribution to the literature, benefit from a particularly robust methodology, especially in the portions that include historiographic and archival research, and throughout the book she uses a variety of theoretical frameworks in astute and challenging ways. As she herself acknowledges, there is, however, a need for developing an archive of experiences concerning popular movements in Italy that have developed over at least the past 40 years in response to racism, immigration, citizenship, diaspora and solidarity projects. Hawthorne shows the necessity of developing a more extensive and complete record, for example, of the daily activities and mobilizations of associations stemming from immigrant and diasporic communities over the decades (I am thinking of associations such as REDANI, the network of Black diaspora in Italy, which formed in 2009), of how African student associations like the Cameroonians have become part of the university fabric, or of the Black participation in the Primo Marzo national mobilizations of 2010 and 2011 for immigrant strikes, or of the role of Black politicians like Jean Leonard Touadi, Cecile Kyenge Kashetu, Yvan Sagnet, Aboubakar Soumahoro, and their impact on movements. All of these might flesh out, in a more nuanced way than is possible now, how

distinct generations of Blacks in Italy have interacted and intersected with Italian progressive movements, parties and trade unions that were mostly white in their composition in ways that may be better suited for present and future alliances.

Pina Piccolo is an independent scholar, writer, and activist, living in Italy and the United States. She co-founded and directed *La macchina sognante. Contenitore di scritture dal mondo*, and is the sole editor of the transnational literary journal *The Dreaming Machine*. She is also the author of the poetry collection *I canti dell'Interregno* (Roma: Lebeg 2018). E-mail: piccolop56@gmail.com

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For New Forms of Thinking about/in Translation and Migration

Renata Morresi

University of Padua

Bertacco, Simona, and Nicoletta Vallorani. *The Relocation of Culture: Translations, Migrations, Borders*. Foreword by Homi K. Bhabha. New York, Dublin, London: Bloomsbury Academic 2021 (148 pages). ISBN: 9781501365218.

ABSTRACT

Bertacco and Vallorani's dual gaze focuses on the metaphorical quality and the material reality of the phenomena of translation and migration, in the places and time that most concern them, not treating them as exceptions to a residential or monolingual norm but rather as facts shaping the substance of a global humanistic culture: we cannot truly comprehend translation if we do not also consider its physical and material effects on the lives of those who most urgently needed it, the migrants, nor can we fully comprehend migration, multicultural encounter and intercultural coexistence, and the creative works that take shape in and express them, without facing the various translation processes that accompany their occurrence, including intersemiotic translation.

Keywords

Translation, migration, borders, culture, postcolonial, humanities

In the first issue of the journal *Translation*, in 2011, Arduini and Nergaard called for a new era of translation, outside the usual disciplinary boundaries: “We propose the inauguration of a transdisciplinary research field with translation as an interpretative as well as an operative tool” (8). Such an update, they added, should also concern traditional ways of doing interdisciplinarity: “We imagine a sort of new era that could be termed *post-translation studies*, where translation is viewed as fundamentally transdisciplinary, mobile, and open ended” (Arduini and Nergaard 2011, 8). Bertacco and Vallorani take up the invitation to focus on translation to reshape the field of research in the humanities and use it as a critical instrument. Bertacco and Vallorani's dual gaze focuses on the metaphorical quality and the material reality of the phenomena of translation and migration, in the places and time that most concern them, not treating as exceptions to a residential or monolingual norm but rather as facts shaping the substance of a global humanistic culture: we cannot truly comprehend translation if we do not also consider its physical and material effects on the lives of those who most urgently needed it, the migrants, nor can we fully comprehend migration, multicultural encounter and

intercultural coexistence, and the creative works that take shape in and express them, without facing the various translation processes that accompany their occurrence, including intersemiotic translation.

Weaving a fruitful dialogue with postcolonial studies, cultural studies, and border studies, the two authors investigate translation in at least three ways: as a cultural and not merely linguistic object, as a creative method (and in various areas of aesthetic production), and as tool for knowing - not 'an other,' but the very trajectories of interrelation and transformation, on the border between worlds in the making. The emphasis is placed on translation as a relationship between subjects and contexts immersed in a series of historical and power dimensions, rather than as a neutral transmission of pre-existing information or meanings. We thus move beyond the idea of the translator as an external facilitator who is either an unnecessary addition to the source text or always at risk of erasing its cultural difference. Translation becomes not a secondary product but an internal necessity of the texts themselves, a mode of existence of/in language/s, a quality that informs artistic creation and fruition. Thinking of translation in these terms implies considering it not only in its mission to establish communication and avoid misunderstanding but also in its vocation for the unknown, the knowable and even the error, thus opening "the space for a retranslation" (Berman 2009, 7). Translation, then, not as an alignment between two uniform and monosemic national official languages, but as a phenomenon that challenges that very idea. The "translation literacy" endorsed by Bertacco and Vallorani, "roughly defined as an ability to acknowledge and assess the translational aspects of the world around us" (Bertacco and Vallorani 2021, 9), thus encourages the awareness of being immersed in a translational continuum, always readers-authors-speakers-translators, with our embodied accents and experiences. Bertacco and Vallorani's analyses do so enhancing both the transilingualism inherent in every language and the ethical task of becoming custodians of the space between languages, the only place where human beings can meet. Their vision takes form in the encounter with postcolonial aesthetic and literary production, with its vocation to challenge colonial thought and to rethink migrations, occupations, segregations, displacements. Current and past crises illuminate each other: the journeys of the refugees in the Mediterranean, of the migrants along the land routes of Eastern Europe, or of the people crossing the South-West of the United States, bear the traces and resonate with the deportations of the Atlantic slave trade or the nomadic routes in the *Mare nostrum*, whose pronoun expresses a paradoxical property for a place already etymologically "in between."

In the introduction to the volume, Homi Bhabha states that translation is "a test of time and place" (Bertacco and Vallorani 2021, x). Of time because language, just like humans, inhabits "a temporal realm of transition" (Bertacco and Vallorani 2021, xiii), where power relations, intimate contacts, material but also psychological movement and relocation ensure

language change. Of place because there are sites where translation is not only necessary, it becomes the mother-tongue in which things happen: the new language of those who transit sometimes for very long periods, learned in refugee camps where one is born and lives for years, hushed in the bellies of trucks or ships where one can barely breathe, spoken in detention centers where one remains suspended and imprisoned, in courtrooms where one is questioned about the truth of one's condition of origin, while one has already become other, has already experienced a different pain, another life. There, a new language is born, which can also, paradoxically, be the 'old' language, renewed by the use and experience of unforeseen encounters and circumstances, nourished by new rhythms, tones, timbres that passed through the material existence of "born-translated" subjects (Bertacco and Vallorani 2021, 70). The authors thus show us that the privileged places of translation as a method that expands our epistemic practices are the borderlands, the open sea, the immigration center, and all those sites where the encounter between foreigners takes place. Always provisionally 'foreigners', until a new shared space is created. There, translation is no longer an impossible task, a minor, ungrateful activity, a form of ventriloquism or appropriation, or a function of global capital. It is rather a strategy, where incompleteness and blind spots are to be not tolerated, but assumed as inevitable. Neither the *foris*, the outside, of foreignization, nor the *domus*, the home, of domestication, are entities that can be stable and immovable, easily pointed out: on the threshold the inside and the outside blur, home and what can become home remain in transition and change with our travelling selves. This insight leads Bertacco and Vallorani not only to break with the classical idea that translation is the thing that happens between two distinct and unrelated, ontologically incomparable units, but also to assume that languages are already plural. Translation thus becomes not a coming to terms with diversity, an always frustrated attempt to bridge the difference between languages, but a condition of the existence of languages, always already multilingual in themselves.

The starting point of Bertacco and Vallorani's analyses lies in taking seriously two common metaphors: travel as a metaphor for translation activity, and translation as a metaphor for physically going elsewhere. The book is in fact divided into two parts. "Translation as Migration", written by Simona Bertacco, first considers Emily Jacir's installations "Stazione" (2009) and "Via Crucis" (2016), which explore a millennial Mediterranean culture in which the two homelands of the artist, Palestine and Italy, alternate and coexist in a continuous material and spiritual exchange that reconfigures public spaces. Bertacco then moves on to consider Valeria Luiselli's essay "Tell Me How It Ends," based on the questionnaire that the U.S. immigration court system uses to interview asylum-seeking children, a place where the interpreter becomes anything but secondary and passive, rather an agent who from below constructs worlds and makes them legible. Other texts under analysis come from the creative laboratory of orality and creolization that is the Caribbean. Works by Derek Walcott, Velma

Pollard, and Dionne Brand are discussed here as translational texts and reveal to be traversed by mediation, inhabited by an original displacement, by an accent, with the urgency of *poiesis* that weaves together languages, places, and destinies where national boundaries are visibly artificial, discourse intimately multilingual, and actual existence is often challenged and endangered. They require reading with an accent, accepting their language as situated and embodied, not as a code that transcends or reifies, but as "a text that speaks its own difference" (Bertacco and Vallorani 2021, 66). These practices of "accented writing" (49), "accented reading" (16), and "accented criticism" (16) reveal that the idea that there is a cultural identity uniquely reflected by a language is a fantasy: every language is always already traversed by many languages, echoes, cultural layers, and material histories.

The second part, "Migration as Translation", written by Nicoletta Vallorani, focuses on what happens at the border: between countries, policies, aesthetic practices, sign systems. But also, I would add, systems of life and death, given that migrations in the Mediterranean, for example, are governed by a principle of relocation that animates subjects already 'born translated', who must translate themselves in order to survive, and yet often received with anxiety, uncertainty, rejection, hate. Vallorani is concerned with a range of photographic, cinematic, and visual works that engage with border experience. They are works that try to approach and re-mediate that experience without normalizing it or making it a fetish. Among them, for example, the 2016 film *Sea Sorrow*, a documentary that alternates scenes shot in several refugee camps in Italy, France, and Lebanon, and passages from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The director, actress and activist Vanessa Redgrave, creates a work that uses montage as a form of code-mixing, talking simultaneously different tongues. The urge to renew one's gaze and create a zone of mutual contact and understanding is also in *Lampedusa* (2015), written by the British playwright Anders Lustgarten, which juxtaposes the monologues of two very different characters in search of a new sense of belonging and citizenship. Also examined are Margaret Mazzantini's short novel *Mare al mattino* (2011) and Lina Prosa's play *Lampedusa Beach* (2003). Their strategies differ profoundly, though they are both not exempt from the risk of didactic reductionism of the migrant women represented: the former is elliptical in pursuing the parallelism between two women united by motherhood but very different for conditions and circumstances, the latter is fully articulated in staging, in a high poetic register, the thundering voice of a dead migrant woman. More than for their aesthetic value and testimonial quality these representations, perhaps sentimental rather than transformative, are worth considering for being part of an archive of texts that do not back down in the face of the challenge of the border, the unsettling anxiety it generates when it is crossed and inhabited.

Particularly interesting is Vallorani's analysis of *The Game*, an ongoing multimedia project by photographer Mario Badagliacca, where migrants of the Balkan route become the protagonists of photos with a classical quality, recalling the humanistic values of Renaissance

painters such as Antonello da Messina. Badagliacca's work offers an opportunity to discuss the problems of image domestication, in which “translation by analogy” (Bertacco and Vallorani 2021, 96) can be vitiated by the colonial desire to bring everything back to one's own symbolic system, but it is also about the complexity and urgency of the task – often obstructed and sabotaged from many sides - of creating a common language, which has at its heart the mutual recognition and exchange of cultural and aesthetic values as equal interlocutors.

“How do we understand the stories of translated people that surround us?” (Bertacco and Vallorani 2021, 11). The two authors propose translation as a method. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to call it a translational approach, one that respects objects, subjects, relations, and movements not already written or foreseen, which, each time, at each particular instance of embodiment, ask us to reconfigure our assumptions about cultures, peoples, and languages. In this context, the translation effort is not about producing an 'equal' text or an ‘equal effect’, or turning into a repeatable skill, but becomes a way of seeing the world that embodies a possibility of justice. When migrants use translation to re-locate, transform and self-fashion themselves, when the colonized inhabit the dominant space with their bodies, usages, and inventions, when the geo-cultural spaces are shaped by the experience of the colonized and the migrants, and when those who are involved with them enter those spaces in a shared cognitive adventure, translational practices contribute to a new humanism. This can make a fundamental contribution to pedagogy, information, integration policies, and ecological thinking, that is, to thinking of ourselves as planetary beings, who are asked, among other things, to renounce linguistic absolutism in favor of continuous adjustments toward a radical “linguistic hospitality” (Ricoeur 2006, 23).

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Renata Morresi is currently a research fellow in American literature at the University of Padua. Her research focuses on questions arising from encounters across different languages and cultures, on the study of cross-cultural themes and on the interplay of gender, race, and class. E-mail: renata.morresi@unipd.it

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Post-authenticity: understanding the contingency of Blackness through post-soul memoirs

Francesca Furlan

University of Padua

Monia Dal Checco. *Post-Authenticity: The Collapse of Authentic Blackness in the Post-Soul Memoir.* Napoli: La Scuola di Pitagora 2022 (371 pages). ISBN: 9788865428634.

ABSTRACT

Monia Dal Checco's first monograph is a thoroughly researched overview of the reworkings of blackness operated by so-called "post-soul authors" – a generation of Black Americans who came of age after the end of the great social movements of the Sixties and Seventies. Through the analysis of six memoirs, Dal Checco outlines blackness in contingent and relational terms, highlighting how a stable and finite racial identity is fundamentally unattainable.

Keywords

Post-Soul, memoir, authenticity, Blackness, blaxploration

Monia Dal Checco's *Post-Authenticity*, through a thoughtful and thorough exploration of the post-soul memoir, successfully details the continuous disruption of accepted categories of racial identity and racial performance operated by Black American authors in the decades following the social upheaval of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. After a solid theoretical foundation over the significance of the memoir within American literature, Dal Checco manages to methodically build a description of Blackness as always relational and contingent, or, in other words, fluid, thereby exposing the shortcomings of monolithic tropes of Blackness, created both within and without the Black community. While considering Blackness as an abstract construction, Dal Checco does not sideline its phenomenology, that is, the genuine physical implications that the visual marker of Blackness still implies for those who inhabit it, making this a nuanced and up-to-date analysis. This monograph discusses at some length six memoirs: Jesmyn Ward's *Men We Reaped* (2013), James McBride's *The Color of Water* (1995), Nelson George's *City Kid: A Writer's Memoir of Ghetto Life and Post-Soul Success* (2009), Danzy Senna's "To Be Real" (1995) and *Where Did You Sleep Last Night?* (2009), Ta-Nehisi Coates's *The Beautiful Struggle: A Father, Two Sons, and an Unlikely Road to Manhood* (2008), and M.K. Asante's *Buck: A Memoir* (2013). Dal Checco's analysis paints

a layered picture where race, but notably also gender and class, play a significant role in the authors' processes of self-definition. Her close reading of the texts ultimately shows how intergenerational and multicultural family ties complicate and enrich the authors' journey of self-discovery.

Dal Checco's exploration is aimed at memoirs produced during the post-soul years. Post-soul, a term first coined by music critic and author Nelson George, is used by Dal Checco and other scholars to roughly identify the years between the end of significant activities within the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, around the late 1970s and the beginning of a new era of activism in the 2010s, following the rise of Black Lives Matter. The authors born within this period, while still profoundly affected by the struggles and values of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, are part of the first Black American generation to have always been free from the constraints of segregation – a fact which makes their condition and experience, while not necessarily better, as Dal Checco makes clear, undoubtedly different from other moments in Black Americans' history. This historical period proves particularly fertile for an academic analysis of authenticity because, as Dal Checco's historical overview on shifting notions of Blackness deftly highlights, it is perhaps the first time in American history when Black subjects were given sufficient freedom to explore themselves beyond the rigid racial divisions between black and white, resulting in the development of what Trey Ellis, in his 1989 essay "The New Black Aesthetic," calls 'Cultural Mulattoes'. While Ellis describes the Cultural Mulatto as someone who is "educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures" and "can also navigate easily in the white world," Dal Checco's analysis reworks the concept to show how the meeting of Black and white identities is often the cause of a sense of fragmentation and instability that the authors struggle to come to terms with (quoted in Dal Checco 2022, 119). Built on these post-soul premises, Dal Checco makes the fruitful choice of exploring shifting notions of identity through the memoir – a genre that had a particular resurgence during the post-soul years because it is perhaps best able to aesthetically reproduce the fragmentation resulting from the authors' journey of self-definition.

The strategically selected primary sources are then analyzed through a solid framework for post-soul literature that Dal Checco borrows from Bertram Ashe, professor of English and American Studies at the University of Richmond, Virginia. "The Post-soul Triangular Matrix," developed by Ashe in a 2007 article published in the *African American Review*, provides Dal Checco with three main tenets of the post-soul literary aesthetic: first, the authors or characters all identify or can be identified, to some degree, within the permeable boundaries of the Cultural Mulatto archetype, roughly outlined above; second, artistic works show the process of *blaxploration*, understood as the personal exploration of the various meanings of Blackness, which allows the authors to challenge and defy traditional archetypes; third, post-soul works exhibit a pattern of "allusion-disruption gestures," whereby authors challenge the values of

their parental figures, often times the male one, in order to transcend prescriptive notions of Blackness imposed by previous generations. These three pillars provide structure to *Post-Authenticity* and allow the reader to follow them, as recurring threads of discussion, through the analysis of all six primary sources within the work.

The opening chapter of the monograph lays some terminological groundwork for the work at large that is particularly productive. It provides a nuanced historical and ethical discussion of the controversial prefix 'post', which is now spread across various fields, first and foremost the postcolonial one. *Post-Authenticity* seeks to understand the 'post' in post-soul not only as indicating the historical period and cultural production that came 'after' the major social movements of the Sixties and Seventies but also as indicating the ways the cultural production of the following decades is 'in response and reaction to' those very movements and their values and legacies. Reworking Kwame Anthony Appiah's discussion of the term 'postcolonial', Dal Checco understands post-soul not so much as a finite literary, historical and cultural category but rather as a framing concept in close conversation with the past and the future, which is evident in the way the analysis of primary sources is then carried out. Discussing the meaning of 'post' and situating post-soul apart from other terms, such as post-racial or post-black, as Dal Checco herself recognizes, not only allows for methodological precision but also provides a necessary ethical framework, which overtly acknowledges the lingering effects of white supremacy and the racialization of black bodies. I believe this first chapter will be particularly interesting to those working in postcolonial literature and theory, who share an apparent interest in situating the 'post' label as carefully and flexibly as possible. Building on the framework provided by Chapter One, the second chapter of the monograph provides a historical overview of shifting notions of Blackness by discussing the various literary forms that have characterized African American literature, such as the slave narrative or the protest novel. This analysis builds a history of authenticity that reaches and develops Ashe's Post-soul Triangular Matrix and is therefore very effective in placing the post-soul literary aesthetic in conversation with Black American history and literary history, showing in actual critical practice the understanding of the term 'post' as 'in response and reaction to' previous decades rather than simply 'after'.

Having established a common framework through her definition of post-soul and the pillars set by Ashe with the Post-soul Triangular Matrix, Dal Checco can move to the analysis of her primary sources along the three final chapters of her work, which bring forth a more detailed discussion of how Blackness is understood by different authors. Chapter 3, with the analysis of Ward's and McBride's memoirs, discusses Cultural Mulattism through the intriguing notion of Blackness as liquid, and therefore shapeless in and of itself, but rather adaptable and reflective – a concept reworked from Alessandra Raengo's research project *Liquid Blackness*. Ward's experience of physical and class mobility through education and McBride's reckoning

with what his mother's whiteness means for his own identity reveal the multiple ways Blackness is a more functional identity category to the authors when given range and flexibility. In this sense, the analysis of both memoirs seems to highlight how Raengo's invitation to "leverage rather than condemn" the "mobility" implied in a Blackness, understood as physical and cultural, is the most productive choice for both authors (quoted in Dal Checco 2022, 187).

Chapter 4 provides insight into the dynamics of *blaxploration*, already outlined as one of Ashe's pillars for the post-soul aesthetic, but offers additional nuance by placing it in dialogue with multiraciality. Nelson George's memoir is particularly effective in expanding the description of the new archetypes of Blackness, especially in its depiction of the thriving cultural and artistic scene in Fort Greene between the Eighties and Nineties. George's optimistic outlook on the way Black subjects have been able to successfully rework Black 'types' in a sort of Hip Hop Renaissance is countered with Danzy Senna's struggle to be recognized as Black in a world that boxes her as white based solely on the visual marker of her light skin color. Senna interestingly understands the scrutinizing gaze of the onlooker as a Rorschach's test, showing, therefore, that the way Blackness is socially conceptualized is as much a choice of the subject as it is a test, a Rorschach's test, of the onlooker's understanding of race. The analysis of Senna's and George's memoirs shows how *blaxploration* leads both authors to understand Blackness as fundamentally contingent on the social situation one is in and on its participants, whether it is lived as a positive, creative endeavor, as in George's case, or as a painful mediation with different family histories and political stances, as in Senna's case.

The final chapter looks more in-depth at the interesting pattern of "allusion-disruption gestures" that Ashe has already identified in his study of post-soul literature. This theme, as carried out throughout the work and this section in particular, offers stimulating discussions on the role of gender in the personal reworkings of Blackness operated in all the memories analyzed in *Post-Authenticity*. Through her literary analysis, Dal Checco is able to show that many, if not most, post-soul authors seem to agree in their critique of the ideals of strong Black masculinity that had dominated the Civil Rights and Black Power movements and are more responsive to feminist demands to rework ideals of Blackness to be more inclusive and queer-friendly. Pushing back against the gender politics that had dominated the social movements of the Sixties and Seventies, post-soul memoirs offer a diversified portrait of how gender is mediated by all authors, especially through their complicated relationships with father figures, whether absent or overbearingly present.

To conclude, I would recommend *Post-Authenticity* to scholars interested in both American and postcolonial literatures and critical race studies first and foremost because it provides a well-researched and up-to-date overview of the subject of authenticity while maintaining a clear and accessible writing style. Some of its arguments, such as its contextualization of post-soul and its nuanced analysis of race in relation to gender, are well

carried out and might be helpful to inspire further research on identity and race politics in contemporary USA.

Francesca Furlan is a PhD fellow in Linguistic, Philological and Literary Sciences at the University of Padua, where she works on the project *Transtext* of the Department of Linguistic and Literary Studies (DiSLL). Her current research covers postcolonial and American literature, focusing on the postcolonial *Bildungsroman* genre. E-mail: francesca.furlan.4@phd.unipd.it