

***Global Ecologies and the Environmental Humanities: Postcolonial Approaches*, edited by Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Jill Didur, and Anthony Carrigan. New York: Routledge, 2015.**

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“[T]he climate crisis,” writes Indian novelist Amitav Ghosh in his latest book, *The Great Derangement*, “is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination. [...] This culture is, of course, intimately linked with the wider histories of imperialism and capitalism that have shaped the world” (Ghosh 2016, pp. 9-10). Ghosh’s assertion, which mobilizes at once the stories, history, and politics of climate change, resonates with the central arguments that animate DeLoughrey, Didur, and Carrigan’s *Global Ecologies and the Environmental Humanities*: that “the history of globalization and imperialism is integral to understanding contemporary environmental issues” (p. 2), and that “focusing on how to narrate both ecological crisis and utopian visions is vital” (p. 4) to conjuring up and articulating our future.

The volume constitutes a collective intellectual endeavour to delineate a “postcolonial environmental humanities,” of which the introduction provides, if not a manifesto, then at least an agenda of sorts. The editors

describe the environmental humanities as an emerging and compelling interdisciplinary research field that is premised on the awareness of the positionality of knowledge, that is focused on the role of narrative in mediating truth claims and in mobilizing support for climate change action and environmental justice, and that is best informed by the postcolonial attention to global power relations, hierarchical structures of knowledge, and the multiple, complex, and contradictory experiences of ecology.

The performative power of narrative and the theoretical and methodological import of postcolonial studies are explored, to a greater or lesser extent, in the sixteen essays that follow the introduction. These are organised into five sections, each focused on specific concerns of environmental humanities, providing a variety of angles on how narrative works negotiate environmental epistemologies, and how humanities research can contribute to understanding, and possibly shaping, our global ecological life. The sections explore: colonial discourses of nature and imperial land politics (Part I, “The Politics of Earth: Forests, Gardens, Plantations”); the place of postcolonial humanities in the study of socio-ecological disaster vulnerability and risk reduction strategies (Part II, “Disaster, Vulnerability, and Resilience”); narratives of resistance to environmental violence, and indigenous forms of activism (Part III, “Political Ecologies and Environmental Justice”); political ecologies, their globalising discourse, and their impact on fiction (Part IV, “Mapping World Ecologies”); imperial formations and counter-aesthetics in the new age of humans (Part V, “Terraforming, Climate Change, and the Anthropocene”).

The arrangement of the individual contributions into thematic sections is consistent with the editors’ effort to articulate a coherent framework for a postcolonial environmental humanities, but the common theoretical underpinnings and the shared concerns running through the chapters allow for a non-linear reading of the volume, and invite readers to trace

interpretive connections across the parts. The organising thread of the following overview, for example, is the general interest of the essays in the question of narrative—its forms, its fictional, factual, and medial incarnations, plus its reading and research practices.

A number of essays have a significant relevance to how global ecologies are imagined, and how our environmental futures are being narratively produced, and could be read together as a groundwork for an environmentally informed narratology. In “Narrativizing Nature: India, Empire, and Environment” (pp. 35-50), David Arnold identifies two dichotomous genres of environmental writings, the “place-sited” and the “itinerant” narratives, and calls upon two different texts in relation to the representation of nature in British India—a Bengali novel, and a collection of colonial administrative reports—to analyse their respective techniques, and the positionality of their authors. Then Michael Niblett’s chapter on the impact of political ecologies of sugar and oil on fiction shifts the focus to the question of narrative register. In “Oil on Sugar: Commodity Frontiers and Peripheral Aesthetics” (pp. 268-85), Niblett mobilizes Michael Löwy’s concept of critical irrealism to examine the “irrealist register” of several novels from the economic peripheries of the petro- and saccharine-dominated world-system. Löwy’s notion is also central to Sharae Deckard’s definition of the “ecogothic form.” Her essay, “Ghost Mountains and Stone Maidens: Ecological Imperialism, Compound Catastrophe, and the Post-Soviet Ecogothic” (pp. 286-305), takes postcolonial ecocritical insights into the study of post-Soviet fiction in order to tease out a series of narrative tropes that speak to themes of ecological imperialism and post-catastrophic existence. Next, starting from Rob Nixon’s notion of “slow violence” as opposed to the sensationalist idiom in which most narratives of climate change are developed, Elizabeth DeLoughrey’s “Ordinary Futures: Interspecies Worldings in the Anthropocene” (pp. 352-72) turns to Keri Hulme’s fictional world of queer kinship and ecological liminality to question the

efficacy of apocalyptic discourse in imagining ways to represent the futures of the Anthropocene. Finally, George B. Handley's "Climate Change, Cosmology, and Poetry: The Case of Derek Walcott's *Omeros*" (pp. 333-51) draws on Walcott's environmental poetics to think about the relation between literary language and climate change, as well as to emphasise the role of hermeneutics and the need for a new, eco-cosmological poetics of reading.

A second group of essays considers forms of environmental narratives beyond fiction, and across different media. Works of visual artists and documentary filmmakers are the subjects of, respectively, Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert's and Jorge Marcone's contributions. In "Bagasse: Carribean Art and the Debris of the Sugar Plantation" (pp. 73-94), Paravisini-Gebert examines the projects of four Caribbean artists who use *bagasse*, the residue left after sugar cane milling, as artistic material, as well as a symbol for the region's history of colonization, labor exploitation, and environmental violence. Marcone's chapter, "Filming the Emergence of Popular Environmentalism in Latin America: Postcolonialism and Buen Vivir" (pp. 207-25), brings in a sizeable corpus of documentary films about popular environmental struggles in Latin America. Acknowledging that, while they provide visibility to critical social movements and to local struggles against land dispossession and climate change, these documentaries largely neglect indigenous non-anthropocentric ontologies, Marcone looks at the experience of Buen Vivir as an alternative, eco-cosmopolitan way for thinking development, decolonization, and the interaction between humans and "more-than-human pluralities."

With respect to non-fictional writing, Barbara Rose Johnston addresses the *testimonios* and documental history of nuclear colonialism, and Jill Didur examines colonial accounts of botanical expeditions, while Susan K. Martin and Cheryl Lousley turn their attention to legal narratives. Johnston's "Nuclear Disaster: The Marshall Islands Experience and

Lessons for a Post-Fukushima World” (pp. 140-61) traces the history of the US nuclear testing programme in the Marshall atolls, and assesses its human-environmental legacy by reorganising the documental narrative and recuperating the testimony of one Marshallese nuclear survivor. Then in “‘The Perverse Little People of the Hills:’ Unearthing Ecology and Transculturation in Reginald Farrer’s Alpine Plant Hunting” (pp. 51-72), Didur discusses how colonial ideas on foreign peoples and cultures, landscapes and environment, were negotiated and accommodated into Farrer’s work, and how gardening culture at the beginning of the twentieth century was a product of, as well as a site for, a process of cultural exchange reverberating from the periphery of the empire. Next, the fictional *topos* of the Australian “native garden”, and the relation between a national environmental imaginary and legal interpretations of space and place following the 1992 Mabo v Queensland case on indigenous land rights, is investigated by Martin in her chapter “Writing a Native Garden? Environmental Language and Post-Mabo Literature in Australia” (pp. 95-113). Lousley’s analysis of legal narratives is concerned, instead, with the 1987 UN’s Brundtland Commission report *Our Common Futures*, a landmark document that made sustainable development the dominant environmental policy paradigm at international level. Her essay “Narrating a Global Future: *Our Common Future* and the Public Hearings of the World Commission on Environment and Development” (pp. 245-67) considers how the Commission’s global vision ended up resonating with a neo-liberal, neo-imperialist message, and shows how the public hearings held in eleven cities across five continents developed into counter-narratives that articulate a history of global environmental injustice. The ambivalences embedded in the notion of the global, in contrast to the planetary, as “an alternative ground for politics and future making,” are further elaborated by Joseph Masco in “Terraforming Planet Earth” (pp. 309-32), while Byron Caminero-Santangelo’s “Witnessing the Nature of Violence:

Resource Extraction and Political Ecologies in the Contemporary African Novel” (pp. 226-41) reads Helon Habila’s and Nuruddin Farah’s works as fictional counter-narratives that contradict the stereotypical histories of violence that the West has inscribed over the Niger Delta and the Somali regions.

A final string of essays is committed to elaborating new interdisciplinary approaches that integrate postcolonial scholars’ attention to narrative practices with political ecologies and climate change theories. Starting from the relative dearth of studies on the relation between colonialism and disaster, in “Towards a Postcolonial Disaster Studies” (pp. 117-39) Anthony Carrigan employs postcolonial research as a form of disaster studies, bringing the social, political, and economic concerns of the former to the latter, which in turn can re-frame and inform the ways in which textual representation of disasters are examined by postcolonial and environmental humanities scholars. Following Ato Quayson’s call for a more pragmatic approach to interdisciplinarity in postcolonial studies, Carrigan advocates for a renewed interdisciplinary research field that “actively embed[s] conceptual insights derived from cultural and historical analyses into broader, collaborative research projects that are oriented towards achieving change in real-world practices” (p. 123). An example of this is provided by the multi-authored chapter “Island Vulnerability and Resilience: Combining Knowledges for Disaster Risk Reduction Including Climate Change Adaptation” (pp. 162-85). Coming from different scientific fields, Ilan Kelman, JC Gaillard, Jessica Mercer, James Lewis, and Carrigan discuss resilience and vulnerability discourses in small-island contexts, by bringing together DRR approaches and the concerns of environmental humanities, as well as indigenous and non-indigenous perspectives on climate change and disasters, and identifying areas of overlap and contestation, friction, and intersection. The theme of resilience is also central to Susie O’Brien’s

essay “The Edgework of the Clerk: Resilience in Arundhati Roy’s *Walking with the Comrades*” (pp. 189-206), which considers the layers of meaning attached to this notion and Roy’s critique of its use in the service of the developmentalist logic of global capitalism.

While the breadth of the essays as a whole is occasionally overwhelming, and the directions that they take are different and allow for ambiguities and contradictions, their convergence on the key areas of the environmental humanities outlined in the opening chapter ensures the overall coherence of the volume. The collection is, however, uneven, with a few essays more descriptive and theoretically weaker, and others more analytical and sophisticated, yet this is also one of the strengths of the volume, which invites a large scholarly readership, with varied interests and levels of expertise, to engage with the critical conversations that it helps articulate. In the main, the theoretical and methodological insights and the pressing concerns that are put forth by the authors make DeLoughrey, Didur, and Carrigan’s edited collection a welcome, if not an essential, addition to the bookshelf of any humanities researcher—particularly in this time of resurging nuclear spectres, post-truth politics, and climate change denialism.

References

- Ghosh, Amitav. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016.