

ENVIRONMENT

LITERARY AND ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES IN AFRICA

AT THE
MARGINS



EDITED BY

BYRON CAMINERO-SANTANGELO AND GARTH MYERS

Environment at the Margins

Literary and Environmental Studies in Africa

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Introduction

Byron Caminero-Santangelo and Garth A. Myers

IN EARLY June 2009, Shell Oil Corporation agreed to pay more than fifteen million U.S. dollars to a group of ten Nigerian plaintiffs, most prominently the son of writer Ken Saro-Wiwa. The plaintiffs had accused Shell Oil of collaborating with the Nigerian military in the 1995 execution of Saro-Wiwa and eight other leaders of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni Peoples (MOSOP). MOSOP and Saro-Wiwa had tied their nonviolent advocacy for human rights in Ogoniland to highlighting the oil industry's devastating impacts on the ecosystem of their Niger Delta homeland. Although Shell Oil still dismissed the charges, its willingness to settle the case—critics argued that the company “bought their way out of a trial”—inevitably brought home the message that large multinational corporations can be brought to justice for violations of human rights and environmental devastation.¹

Ken Saro-Wiwa was a well-known writer whose life's work focused on environmental justice. On the other side of Africa, Kenya's 2004 Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai traveled somewhat the reverse path. She is an

environmental activist and the founder of the Green Belt Movement, and her best-selling memoir, *Unbowed*, is highly regarded.² In the tragic murder of Saro-Wiwa and the triumphal ascent of Maathai, we see clearly the manner in which the literary and environmental have been prominently connected in Africa as well as the ways in which those two figures emphasize the link between environmental activism and social justice. African writers-as-environmentalists and African environmentalists-as-writers offer powerful alternative ways of understanding nature, conservation, and development, in contrast with dominant ideas of environment. It is at these complex intersections of the literary and the environmental in Africa where the initial impetus for this book is located.

This volume developed as the result of an interdisciplinary colloquium on literature and environment in Africa held in the spring of 2008 at the University of Kansas. Participants explored uses of literature and literary modes of analysis in the study of African environments by geographers, anthropologists, and historians as well as the application of theoretical frameworks and forms of knowledge drawn from geography, anthropology, and environmental history in the study of African and colonial literatures (primarily Anglophone). The two key questions that we focused on were how African literatures and modes of analysis drawn from literary studies might contribute to ways of reading the environment in the other disciplines and how African literary studies might productively draw from studies of African environments. These questions point to the need for dialogue across disciplines to develop better understandings of different discourses regarding African environments and people's relationships with them. In fact, a primary theme that cuts across the volume is dialogue, not just dialogue among disciplines but also dialogue among different visions of African environments and environmental change in Africa.

The need for such dialogue is pressing. More than a century of imperial and neoimperial attitudes and practices has resulted in intractable environmental problems as well as in the need for new kinds of environmental discourses. These attitudes and practices have been fostered in numerous kinds of texts, including literary texts. At the same time, African writers have often been keen spokespeople regarding the dangers of these texts and their environmental repercussions, as has been the case in so many other areas of political action. There is still much work to be done in terms of reading literature from and about Africa in relation to studies in other disciplines involving narratives of environment. Such work enables an understanding of how African literary texts intersect with larger social texts regarding African environments and their material implications. Those

working in literary studies can become more familiar with work being done in other fields that traces environmental attitudes through a wide variety of texts and over long periods of time while taking into account what the different methodologies from other disciplines might bring to the study of literature. Those working in these other disciplines can learn from literary texts and explore how approaches informed by literature and literary theory might contribute to their work. For example, how might literary readings bring attention to the ways that language and formal features such as genre, plotting, and narration operate to construct and deconstruct meaning in different kinds of studies of African environments?

This latter question signals that our volume is part of the burgeoning work, typically termed *ecocriticism*, that brings together environmental and literary studies. An early and commonly cited source defines the term *ecocriticism* as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” when such study moves beyond treating the environment as background (setting) or symbol.³ While *ecocriticism* remains closely associated with literary studies, the term *ecocriticism* is increasingly also used to denote work in other disciplines focused on issues of environmental representation (work often influenced by literary and critical theory). *Ecocriticism* has always had an interdisciplinary component, although the necessary relationship between *ecocriticism* and science (especially ecology) has been complicated, and is also closely associated with political advocacy and specifically with theorizing “about the place of literature in the struggle against environmental destruction.”⁴ *Ecocritics* seek to make their work relevant to efforts directed at understanding environmental degradation and finding less destructive ways of living with and within nature than those offered by the dominant modern ways of the world. As Lawrence Buell claims, “The success of all environmentalist efforts finally hinges not on ‘some highly developed technology, or some arcane new science’ but on ‘a state of mind’: on attitudes, feelings, images, narratives,” all of which can be found in “acts of environmental imagination.”⁵

Ecocriticism initially developed as a subfield in Anglo-American literary studies.⁶ In increasing numbers in the past ten years, however, articles, edited collections, special issues of journals, and monographs have focused on the intersection of *ecocriticism* with postcolonial cultural studies.⁷ Such work has been termed *postcolonial ecocriticism* and often emphasizes the similarities between the two fields of scholarship in terms of a sense of political commitment, interdisciplinarity, and the interrogation of capitalist development and progress. This type of work also focuses on the need for postcolonial studies to be more cognizant of *ecocritical*

concerns: “Although ecocriticism overlaps with postcolonialism in assuming that deep explorations of place are vital strategies to recover autonomy, post-colonial criticism has given little attention to environmental factors” (DeLoughrey, Gosson, and Handley, 5). Even more emphatically, postcolonial ecocritics seek to push against the margins of American and British ecocriticism both to include more postcolonial texts in ecocriticism and to argue that postcolonial literature and theory can transform ecocriticism through increased attention to imperial contexts.

Almost all theorists working to develop postcolonial ecocriticism have noted tensions between postcolonialism and what Buell (*Future*, 8) calls “first-wave ecocriticism.” Following what is chastised as the environmentalism of the affluent, first-wave ecocritics favor literary representations that focus on knowing, appreciating, identifying with, and protecting nature in a relatively pure state and/or on natural forms of belonging. First-wave ecocriticism has a tendency to erase histories of indigenous peoples, of colonial conquest, and of migrations that disrupted notions of wilderness and rooted dwelling. In his groundbreaking article “Environmentalism and Postcolonialism,” Rob Nixon (236) notes the many ways that ecocriticism’s “dominant paradigms of wilderness and Jeffersonian agrarianism” all too easily lead to “ecoparochialism” and “spatial amnesia” in which the histories of indigenous peoples and the shaping of places by transnational forces are suppressed. What we get is “an environmental vision that remains inside a spiritualized and naturalized national frame.”

First-wave ecocriticism’s historical erasure also extends to questions of language and representation, often castigating poststructuralism and historical materialism for their skepticism regarding claims of being able to represent nature in ways that escape political positionality. First-wave ecocritics embrace mimetic approaches to environmental representation with a focus on the ways that literary writing might break through culturally and politically inflected constructions of the environment to achieve a clear, unmediated reflection of the natural world and to give voice to nature. Such a position assumes that we can have knowledge and representation that moves outside the shaping effects of culture and history and that language can become a lens through which we see the world rather than a code that organizes and gives meaning to it. When combined with first-wave ecocritic’s valorization of ecology, this position can lead to an uncritical approach to Western science and its claims of scientific objectivity. For the postcolonial critic, a theoretical stance that denies that all modes of knowledge production entail “institutionalized ways of seeing with *histories*” is extremely problematic.⁸ For example, such a stance can unwittingly

justify the violence done to indigenous peoples, cultures, forms of knowledge, and places through an imperialism working in the name of objective science.

Efforts to make ecocriticism more responsive to historical relationships of power, to colonial history and its effects, and to cultural difference have been central to postcolonial ecocriticism, which emphasizes both the inextricable intertwining of cultural, political, and natural history and “the role of mediation in representing the environment.”⁹ Susie O’Brien (“Back,” 194) notes that postcolonial theory, because of its focus on undermining colonialism’s drive for “an unmediated possession of the world,” highlights “the contradictions that inhere not just between, but also within, all putatively representational discourses, thereby pointing up the dangers of heeding claims by *any* cultural structures (including postcolonialism and ecology) to reflect the world transparently.” Anthony Vital (“Toward,” 90) focuses on the need to balance the assumption that “language constructs our apprehension of the material world (‘nature’)” with the recognition that language itself is “always mediated by culture and society.” In other words, we need to acknowledge not only that language shapes our perception and understanding of the environment rather than giving us a transparent view of the environment but also that language itself is the product of social processes. As a result, all representations of the material world are situated; they give viewpoints of the world that are historically, politically, and culturally positioned. Both O’Brien and Vital (“Toward,” 90) are especially concerned that ecocritics recognize “the historicity of ecology as modern science,” including both its roots in colonial history and its more contemporary universalizing and potentially colonizing impulses. The goal is not to erase ecology’s counterhegemonic or even anticolonial potential but instead to note how ecology (as discourse) has been rendered ambivalent through its history.

In their recent book *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (15), drawing from Vital, argue that postcolonial ecocritical work needs to “explore ‘how different cultural understandings of society and nature’—understandings necessarily inflected by ongoing experiences of colonialism, sexism, and racism—have been deployed in specific historical moments by writers in the making of their art.” From such a general goal come more specific tasks such as exploring the transformation of genres “in different cultural contexts,” tracing “how postcolonial writers from a variety of regions have adapted environmental discourses,” and “demonstrating the knowledge of *non-western* (non-European) societies and cultures.” In many ways, this kind of postcolonial ecocritical work can

be linked with what Buell refers to as second-wave ecocriticism, which focuses on the positionality of environmental representation and knowledge and as a result has expanded ecocriticism and embraced the sort of cross-cultural dialogue that we seek in *Environment at the Margins*. However, postcolonial ecocriticism brings attention to both global imperial contexts and parts of the world often elided even by second-wave ecocritics, whose expertise remains predominantly in American and British literature.

This volume can be considered part of postcolonial ecocriticism. While assuming that environmental representation is always shaped by social history, the contributors address how a wide range of texts deploy imperial environmental discourses and/or alternative narratives in varied historical and geographical contexts across the continent, in histories, and in discursive and narrative strategies, from Garth Myers's discussion of colonial environmental discourse in Eric Dutton's *The Basuto of Basutoland* to Mara Goldman's analysis of Maasai oral environmental dialogue. Just as important, the contributors often explore the transformation of existing tropes, genres, and concepts (including ecocritical concepts) or the significance of suppressed environmental epistemologies for reimagining development, environmental protection, sustainability, and relationships between humans and nonhuman nature toward the goal of forging a better future for Africa. This journey in the book cuts an arc from Byron Caminero-Santangelo's and Anthony Vital's postcolonial ecocritical discussions of Nadine Gordimer and John Coetzee, respectively, through analyses of intersections between literary and policy devices in the works of Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Zakes Mda, Mia Couto, Ben Okri, and Wangari Maathai in chapters by Laura Wright, Amanda Hammar, Jonathan Highfield, and Rob Nixon, respectively.

Yet the volume's Africa focus begs us to question the significance of geographical delimitation for postcolonial ecocriticism. Is there an African ecocriticism? If so, what is its relationship with the broader field? There has not been as much explicitly ecocritical work on Africa as there has been on, for example, Caribbean literature, and prior to this book there have been no published edited volumes or full-length studies.¹⁰ In one of the first published discussions of African literature and ecocriticism, "Ecoing the Other(s): The Call of Global Green and Black African Responses," William Slaymaker argued "that global ecocritical responses to what is happening to the earth have had an almost imperceptible African echo" (138) and called for both African writers and critics to embrace what he saw as a global ecocritical movement: "African creative writers and literary or cultural scholars would benefit from the global environmental movement"

(140). While agreeing with the call for greater attention to environmental concerns by African critics, Byron Caminero-Santangelo questioned Slaymaker's overreliance on first-wave ecocriticism in judging if a piece of literature is properly environmental and claimed that ecocritical theory itself would need to be decentered if it was to be relevant in the context of African literature and criticism.

If only first-wave criteria are applied, there has certainly been little ecocritical literary writing from Africa. African writers have primarily addressed pressing political and social issues in colonial and postcolonial Africa. Concomitantly, in terms of environmental representation, these writers are concerned with lived environments, the social implications of environmental change, and the relationships between representations of nature and power. Certainly this is evident in even a cursory reflection on, say, the way that the environment figures into the works of Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Nuruddin Farah, Ayi Kwei Armah, Ousmane Sembene, and many more African authors. These writers do not focus on nature in its pure state or on its preservation.

In contrast with such writers' approaches to nature, as Caminero-Santangelo points out, the practice of conservation in Africa has often been underpinned by ideas about a pristine nature that is threatened by indigenous environmental practice and in need of protection by those from the West with proper environmental sensibility. Erased by such a narrative are the extensive intertwined history of nature and culture in Africa and the creation of spaces of pure wilderness through the forced removal of those with long histories of inhabitation. Furthermore, the focus on nature and its preservation in the context of Africa can shift attention from social problems or make such problems secondary to conservation (especially of fauna). In this context, an ecocriticism based on principles from the environmentalism of the affluent will not find much traction in African literary studies. In an early article on ecocriticism and South African literary studies, Julia Martin made a similar point. She noted the tension between "a definition of environmental priorities that was perfectly in keeping with the . . . colonial project" (3) and the concerns of the "the majority of South Africans" who would see such priorities as "irrelevant, and even inimical, to the struggle for social and political justice" (1). In this context, she found it striking that there was "a rather uncritical focus on 'nature writing'" in British and American ecocriticism and pondered "if opening the canon to other voices" might "subvert the genre's foundations": "Is the nature of Third World environments likely to produce the texts of wilderness, forests, and the great outdoors with which we are familiar? I think of the

difficulties of teaching Wordsworth to students from the townships" (4). Anthony Vital ("Toward," 88) likewise notes that "an African ecocriticism would differentiate itself from ecocriticism in the North, which has . . . either not felt compelled to engage with the consequences of European colonialism or found the available forms of postcolonial criticism to be inconsistent with ecocritical goals and strategies."

Caminero-Santangelo, Martin, and Vital are clearly making arguments similar to those offered by scholars theorizing postcolonial ecocriticism. However, they also point to the need to take into account the specificity of cultural, discursive, and material contexts in Africa; the ways that modernity has shaped Africa; and the kinds of local responses that have been engendered. Discussion of such contexts gestures toward possible ways that Africa might be thought of differently in terms of environment. In the Western imagination, Africa has been and still is framed as a singularity constituted by absence—of time, civilization, or humanity—and this image has served to legitimate the exploitation of places and peoples in Africa. Given the history of this representation as well as the continent's heterogeneity, it is tempting to dismiss any representation of Africa as a place as a fantasy, and a dangerous one at that. As Mbembe somewhat grandly proclaims, "There is no description of Africa that does not involve destructive and mendacious functions."¹¹

However, this constructed geographical category of Africa has also taken on its own reality as a result of history. We cannot ignore, according to Ferguson, the ways that the imaginary category has been accepted as "real," and Africa has become what he refers to as a "place-in-the-world," where the "world" means an

encompassing categorical system within which countries and geographical regions have their "places," with a "place" understood as both a location in space and a rank in a system of social categories (as in the expression "knowing your place"). . . . That "Africa" (however heterogeneous or incoherent such a category may be in the eyes of scholars) is such a "place"—that is, a socially meaningful, only too real, and forcefully imposed position in the contemporary world—is easily visible if we notice how fantasies of a categorical "Africa" and "real" political-economic processes on the continent are interrelated.¹²

Africa as a category may be a phantasm of colonial discourse, but imperialism past and present has also brought this phantasm to life. Mbembe

(237) himself is guilty of deploying this Africa and the “Africans” who inhabit it regularly in his work. Africa has become different from the rest of the globe, but this difference can only be understood properly in terms of a history of unequal global economic and political connections feeding off of and giving reality to an assigned geographical position.

The twinned notion of connection and difference as a means of characterizing what Ferguson calls “Africa talk” also has profound significance in terms of environmental degradation and protection. Global environmental problems—global warming, overfishing of oceans, disposal of toxic waste—have already deeply affected many Africans. Yet most Africans are not the primary sources of these problems, nor do many Africans generally benefit from the resource exploitation that engenders them. More localized problems too are often shaped by global factors that are difficult for many Africans to address, in particular the shaping of local political, cultural, and economic conditions by the legacies of colonialism and (neo)imperial capital.¹³ Cycles of poverty resulting from these legacies have had substantial negative impacts on African environments, and in turn the resulting environmental conditions have been major factors in these vicious cycles.

Problems in environmental conservation also need to be thought of in regard to long-term historical global relationships and the ways they have structured local conditions. Conservation policy has often been determined by imperial representations of African environments and people, such as representations of the “true” Africa as a wilderness empty of people and of African environments threatened by local environmental practices.¹⁴ Enabled by such representations as well as the notion of African nature’s unique immensity and exoticism, colonial-style fortress conservation of megafauna (often with a band-aid of community conservation) is given particular prominence through the operation of wildlife nongovernmental organizations and the tourist industry working with African governments. What tends to be ignored is both (long) local histories of environmental interaction and global (structural) causes for degradation, often with devastating effects for local peoples and ineffective preservation efforts in the long term.

We would suggest that given the significance, environmentally and otherwise, of Africa as a place-in-the-world, it is important to pursue an African ecocriticism. We recognize that such a project will be part of postcolonial ecocriticism, even while it requires the latter to account for differences and contradictions resulting from variations in geographic scale. Postcolonial ecocriticism—like ecocriticism and postcolonialism

more generally—needs to make connections across cultural and historical difference but in the pursuit of unity should also resist suppressing differences. In this sense, the best kind of postcolonial ecocriticism will avoid becoming associated with too narrow a set of theoretical commitments. Buell (“Future,” 11) has claimed that “ecocriticism gathers itself around a commitment to environmentality from whatever critical vantage point.” Something similar might be said of postcolonialism, using the term *anti-imperialism* instead of the term *environmentality*. In fact, ecocriticism and postcolonialism run the risk of becoming obsolete precisely when they become associated too closely with a single “critical vantage point,” such as environmentalism of the affluent (in the case of ecocriticism) or post-structuralism (in the case of postcolonialism). If postcolonial ecocriticism allows itself to become tied to overly specific theoretical positions—for example, a Derridean approach to speciesism or a strictly Marxist version of environmental justice—it will risk betraying its resistance to colonizing, universalizing forms of representation and its commitment to true dialogue among different narratives of nature and culture.

From another angle, what makes Africa as a place-in-the-world such a critical site for further developing postcolonial ecocriticism is the relevancy of questions of environmental governance. Governance is most commonly understood as a means of getting at the shifting power dynamics of decision making in an era when the roles of states are in flux and responsibilities over environmental management are ostensibly decentralized, privatized, or made participatory.¹⁵ Decentralization, democratization, and privatization are typically perceived to go hand in glove in discursive tactics designed to project an image of local empowerment and enfranchisement; in actual practice, across the continent disempowerment and disenfranchisement are ironically the common result.¹⁶ The resultant crises in governance spiral together with conflicts over natural resources, while programs for the decentralized, democratized, privatized, and participatory management of natural resources are often central flashpoints of governance failures.¹⁷ For the dominant narrative voices on Africa’s environmental problems, the crisis points are deemed too grand and important to belong to fictitious nation-states, so the governance over them goes to the global scale, with international agencies constructing notions of “local community participation” that fit their interests (Ferguson, *Global Shadows*, 42–43).¹⁸ Rhetoric on local community empowerment is mismatched with policies that foster elite capture of that empowerment process and instrumentalizes the participation to meet the needs of international donors and Western conservationists.