Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment
Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin
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Postcolonial Ecocriticism takes up the challenge of bringing together two pairs of standoffish, if not openly antagonistic, critical perspectives: postcolonialism vs. ecocriticism, and ecology vs. "zoocriticism," as the authors term the cultural study of animals. Dialogue between the first two, signaled in the book's title, has been underway for a while, with a number of critics working to articulate the space between postcolonial and environmental studies (Cilano and Deloughrey, Huggan, Huggan and Tiffin, Nixon). The relationship between ecology and animals, which might seem intuitively more obvious, has been more fraught, for reasons explained by the narrator of J.M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* (1999):

> In the ecological vision, the salmon and the river-weeds and the water-insects interact in a great, complex dance with the earth and the weather. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts. In the dance, each organism has a role: it is these multiple roles, rather than the particular beings who play them, that participate in the dance. As for actual role-players, as long as they are self-renewing, as long as they keep coming forward, we need pay them no heed. (53-54)

The scandal of that omission, which is the subject of Coetzee's novel, is a central concern in Huggan and Tiffin's study. While the authors do not completely reconcile animals and ecology (the first nearly two-thirds of their book is focused on "Postcolonialism and the Environment," the second third on "Zoocriticism and the Postcolonial," with a final short, intriguing Postscript titled "After Nature") they make a compelling case that the struggle for "a genuinely post-imperial, environmentally based conception of community" (6) must be fought on all fronts.

Postcolonial Ecocriticism offers a comprehensive summary and intelligent analysis of concerns and debates that define the terrain between and within the fields it surveys, including: differences, and potential connections, between Northern and Southern environmentalisms, the ambiguous legacies of development, the problem of subaltern (including non-human) agency, the way genre (pastoral vs. protest literature, for example) determines the scope of the postcolonial and eco/zoocritical imagination, and the necessary tension between activism and aesthetics. Like many postcolonial critics, Huggan and Tiffin are centrally concerned with this key issue, wanting both to legitimate the attention they pay to literature as a way to gain leverage on material problems, but also to insist to some degree on the autonomy of the imagination. Not surprisingly this

book also shares a tendency evident in much postcolonial criticism with foregrounding the periodic disjunction between social scientific analysis of structures and processes—development, for example—and close reading of literary texts. However, it succeeds better than most in analyzing the activist component of literature, while achieving the important objective of "taking full account of the literary qualities of writing that is often assumed to be purely instrumental" (41). This balance is especially evident in the text's astute analysis in Chapter One of Arundhati Roy and Ken Saro-Wiwa, authors who exemplify, perhaps better than most, the interweaving of aesthetics and politics that characterizes environmentally-focused postcolonial literature.

Given the impossibility of exhaustive coverage in a volume of this scope, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* covers an impressive range of texts, including mainly fiction, but also poetry and drama, from India, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, the Caribbean, and the postcolonial diaspora. A nice counterpoint to the book's broadly thematic organization is offered by a short section on Oceania, whose bioregional focus highlights connections between writers such as Albert Wendt, Patricia Grace, and Witi Ihimaera around the issues of tourism and nuclear-weapons testing. Appropriately for a book concerned with new and inchoate ideas, a fair amount of space is devoted to recent fiction; for example, Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003), Zakes Mda's *The Whale Caller* (2005), J.M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) and Robyn Williams's *2007* (2001) are all perceptively read for the new light they shed on postcolonial post (or "pan") humanist realities (208). The text also includes fresh perspectives on canonical postcolonial literature; for example, in explicit counterpoint to Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), which gave expression to the complex African civilization in the shadows of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Huggan and Tiffin look at Barbara Gowdy's *The White Bone* (1998), which considers another eclipsed presence in Conrad's novel: the ivory trade, narrated in Gowdy's case by the elephants. The novel confounds the tendency to read the protagonists in animal stories as allegorical stand-ins for humans, by giving hunters a fearsome but secondary role; significantly the barbarity of hunting elephants is gauged not by the race of the hunters, but by the "ferocity and impact" of the technology involved in a practice that now employs, on unequal terms, both black and white killers (151). Thus Gowdy's novel, along with others considered here (Findley's *Not Wanted on the Voyage* (1984), Martel's *Life of Pi* (2001)) delinks the chain of association according to which both colonial and postcolonial, explicitly racist as well as anti-racist, writers have traditionally defined morality and violence in terms of human civilization vs. animal savagery.

Bolstering the textual readings is a strong line of theoretical argument, in which the voices of postcolonial and eco-critics are brought into lively conversation with critical race theorists, development/ globalization critics, feminist, indigenous and animal-rights philosophers and cultural theorists. The effect is consistently engaging and insightful.

Occasional hiccups are confined largely to the introduction, where the arguments that emerge so clearly in the text sometimes get hung up on nuance; what feels like too many sentences start with "yet," "however," "if," "not that," and "still," and lengthy endnotes serve as often to complicate as they do to supplement discussion in the main text. But this is a minor quibble. A little messiness is arguably part of the inevitable "bush-clearing" that a book like this must engage in, if it is to establish the foundations for vital new disciplinary alliances.

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