

*Environment at the Margins: Literary and Environmental Studies in Africa*

Byron Caminero-Santangelo and Garth Myers, eds.

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As Mara Goldman, a contributor to one of the most interesting chapters in this collection reminds us, “understanding change and continuity in African environments has always involved storytelling” (95). Until relatively recently, however, the narrative production of “Africa” has tended to serve the interests of those invested with power: colonialists and conservationists interested in African environments as symbolic and material terrains to be explored and—no matter how ostensibly benign the intentions of the latter—exploited. It is the implicit contention of this collection that it is not until the emergence of post-colonial literature from the 1960s to the 2000s that different kinds of stories began to be told. The early novels of Ngugi are taken to be exemplary of this trend by a number of contributors; the fiction of Mia Couto, Ben Okri, J.M. Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer, and Zakes Mda are all to one degree or another taken to “reenvision African environments and human relationships with them that will result in new environmental practices” (14).

But the more significant—and explicit—contention made by *Environment at the Margins* is that is not merely within iconic literary works or a given historical moment or movement that “an African ecocriticism” (6) is to be discovered. Instead, the assembled essays range from critiques of colonial accounts of African peoples, landscapes and animals (Garth Myers, Roderick Neumann, Jane Carruthers, David MacDermott Hughes) to the writing of post-colonial anthropology and ecology *as* fiction (Mara Goldman, Amanda Hammar). The rationale here is to bring “literary and environmental studies of Africa into robust interdisciplinary dialogue” (15), so that an “African ecocriticism” might emerge performatively through such an encounter, rather than be prescribed as an addendum to a generic, first world-issued “postcolonial ecocriticism” (10). The collection thus addresses a diverse range of stories told about African environments and the effects these have: from colonial discourse and the history of environmental “governance” (12) on the one hand to orature and postcolonial activism on the other.

The editors’ commitment to a dialogic ethos is evidenced by the internal narrative of the collection. Successive chapters implicitly read and revision the epistemological premises of those preceding. This reflexive editorial move is most apparent in the clustering of closely related chapters: the first three cover “critiques of colonialist constructions of nature and landscape;” the next three “articulate alternative visions of

African environments from orature and literature;” and in the final four chapters we find that “the theme of literary engagements with environmental policy and governance” are “steadily foregrounded” (11-12). As mentioned above, the most interesting example here is Mara Goldman’s anthropological report of a Maasai environmental planning meeting. In her chapter, Goldman seeks to ventriloquize this event as it happened and was experienced locally, by transliterating the dialogic “rhythms” of the Maasai *enkinguena* (community meetings in which “truths are negotiated” [103]). The rationale behind Goldman’s creative—indeed, literary—approach to her anthropological study exemplifies the dialogic ideal that underpins the collection in general. However, the report itself contains so many “creative” authorial interjections (not only her own direct translations but also the fictional voices of individuals never actually co-present at an actual meeting) that the “story” that emerges is more a confused cacophony than a dialogue where “knowledge, view and ideas that would normally be invisible become visible” (113).

By contrast, Amanda Hammar’s interview with the Mozambican ecologist and writer Mia Couto demonstrates the interdisciplinary, ecocritical potential of literary writing in a more convincing fashion. As Hammar puts it, “there are countless examples of both fiction and nonfiction writing that fail to move the reader and hence fail to do their work” (135). While she shares Goldman’s first-wave critique of the failure of scientific discourses to apprehend the totality of the human and non-human relationships in Africa, she uses Couto’s novel *Sleepwalking Land* to argue that

The point [of more creative approaches to scientific writing about African environments] is not to promote sentimentalism in relation to what is unbearable, nor is it to encourage idealizing the creative agency of those who survive and transform what seems impossible to bear . . . much of the success of such an endeavour rests on the nature and quality of translation from observing and engaging to knowing and from knowing to representation. (135)

Couto’s writing is so evocative and engaging, Hammar argues, thanks to his craft in conveying an intimate knowledge of “the interconnected social and natural worlds that we inhabit and coproduce (with both humans and nonhumans)” (135). But one might also argue that the power of his storytelling in this regard—which dramatizes the “*simultaneity of worlds*” (129) through “the language of dreaming” (135)—borders on a level of abstraction that threatens to reproduce some of the de-historicizing tendencies found in first wave ecocriticism.

In seeming recognition of this tendency, the *situatedness* of both literary and scientific discourses is the dominant theme of the final cluster of chapters. Anthony Vital examines the way in which J.M. Coetzee’s novel *Age of Iron* stages a negative critique of a globalised, capitalist modernity through a meditation on the meaning of “waste” in the South African context. Byron Caminero Santangelo examines Lawrence Buell’s (Williamsian) notion of the “environmental unconscious” as that structure

of feeling is mediated through Nadine Gordimer's novels *The Conservationist* and *Get a Life*. Laura Wright offers a comparative discussion of the way in which Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* and Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness* "imagine and mythologize the impact of precolonial pasts on postcolonial presents" (236). Jonathan Highfield's "Agroforestry and Food Sovereignty in Ben Okri's *Famished Road* Trilogy" invokes Fanon in the most staunchly materialist corrective to the postmodernist position earlier advanced by Goldman and (more cautiously) advocated by Hammar:

While redreaming the world and freeing the duiker to wreak havoc among the forces of globalization are important first steps, they are only prayers offered with borrowed wine. The local cycles of production and consumption need to be restored, forests need to be replanted, and crops need to be remembered so that food comes under the control of those who plant it for their tables, for families and friends, and for their very livelihood and survival. (Highfield 153)

Highfield's politically charged reading goes against the grain of dominant interpretations of the trilogy. But this approach provides useful bite to the overarching theme of collection, concerned as it is with the material relationship between the writing of African environments and environmental activism. And in this regard, the intertwined aesthetic and political dimensions of this relationship are most impressively explored in Rob Nixon's keynote chapter, "Slow Violence, Gender, and the Environmentalism of the Poor." Through the comparison of Rachael Carson and Wangari Maathai, Nixon examines an otherwise occluded literary dimension of environmental activism, which is to say, activism itself as a powerful form of symbolic communication: "Through her testimony and through her movement's collective example [tree planting], she has sought to reframe conflict resolution for an age when instant cinematic catastrophe has tended to overshadow violence that is calamitous in more insidious ways" (277).

Carminero-Santangelo and Myers do well to end on this note and should be commended for their careful editing of an eclectic range of essays. *Environment at the Margins* is a worthy addition to the growing corpus of postcolonial ecocriticism that includes DeLoughrey and Handley's *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment* (Oxford UP, 2011), Roos and Hunt's *Postcolonial Green: Environmental Politics and World Narratives* (U of Virginia P, 2010), Huggan and Tiffin's *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (Routledge, 2009), and Nixon's own *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Harvard UP, 2011).