

Different Shades of Green: African Literature, Environmental Justice, and Political Ecology

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Different Shades of Green is one of the major book projects to date on the study of Atlantic Africa's environmental literature.¹ Undergraduate and graduate students anywhere working on ecocritical writing and criticism will find this book fascinating because it brings together various ecocritical approaches to African literature in one volume. Postcolonial and interdisciplinary par excellence, the book draws on a critical perspective built on the theorizing of global environmental justice and political ecology, and explores the intersectional ties among African writing, environmentalism, anticolonial struggle, and social justice. The book embraces the historic Atlantic Africa, bringing into dialogue a wide range of African creative writers. Author Caminero-Santangelo, Associate Professor of English at the University of Kansas, has produced extensive scholarship on the intersection of African literary studies and ecocriticism. On this trajectory, he authored *African Fiction and Joseph Conrad: Reading Postcolonial Intertextuality*, and coedited *Environment at the Margins: Literary and Environmental Studies in Africa*.

The book, as a postcolonial text, is highly attentive to the ways imperial discursive and material power engender difference and to how such difference matters for understanding various kinds of unequal political and economic relationships and their possibilities for transformation. As a result, postcolonialism always has the challenge of being attentive to particular differences, with special attention to the relational construction of place, culture, and identity through asymmetrical power. A place-based approach to postcolonial and regional studies hones Caminero-Santangelo's didactic purpose in the book. This approach, described in the first chapter "The Nature of Africa," encourages a consideration of how Africa might be thought about as different from other parts of the world in terms of the way it has been constructed by imperial capitalism and globalization. The history of interrelationships among imperial power, economic processes, and representations of Africa has made a category that, like all categories, is historically and socially constructed, but also one that is real, that is imposed with force, and that has a mandatory quality. Africa's association with savage wilderness has been a significant factor in the continent's transformation into a "place-in-the-world" (Ferguson, *Global* 5). This reductive classification of colonial epistemology has facilitated the undermining of Africans' agency and humanity, patterns of unjust extractive and ecological enclaves, and

socioecological transformation. The African environmental literary tradition explored in the book emphasizes the relationship between these conditions and stereotypical naturalizing representations of the continent.

Whereas the classic version of world systems theory focuses on the agency of Europeans in creating a Eurocentric world system and the peripherization of Africa, writers of the sensibilities of the global encounters proponents—and explicitly of environmentalist sensibilities—such as Tanure Ojaide, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Chinua Achebe, Zakes Mda, and Nuruddin Farah, seek to focus on African agencies and internal African dynamics. But the quest to understand the role of European-dominated economy in constraining and enabling different kinds of historical agents in the making of Africa may move world systems theorists and writers closer in formulating compatible theoretical frameworks.

Challenging unjust, ecologically destructive forms of imperial development, African writers bring together insights from political ecology, ecocriticism, and environmental activism. For instance, holding onto the memory of resistance and of hope, poets and novelists like Ken Saro-Wiwa, Tanure Ojaide and Ogaga Ifowodo keep alive forms of representation challenging colonial official lies and maintain the ground for a different future. In their postcolonial writings, they are also engaged in a process which Henry Louis Gates calls “signifying.” According to Gates, this signifying process “functions as a metaphor for formal revision, or intertextuality” (xxi); it is repetition with difference, change in continuity. If Ojaide’s and Ifowodo’s revisions foreground homage and continuity, rather than disjuncture, they still, like Achebe’s model of cultural production, entail significant change, perhaps even “extravagant aberration,” by virtue of which “Achebe doesn’t see collective identity in bounded, transhistorical terms, and doesn’t ground development in a return to identities from the past” (*Different Shades* 157). Achebe’s extravagant aberration, honed in the principle that “no condition is permanent” is informed by the Igbo dynamic wisdom based on skepticism and doubt which magnificently prevails throughout *Different Shades of Green*.

The book has four parts with interrelated goals: to show that Africa has indeed produced environmental literary aesthetics; to analyze how African literature can challenge capitalist assumptions regarding African environments through powerful counternarratives; to question widely accepted definitions of environmental writing and the undercurrent constructions of nature and scientific conservation therein inscribed; to explore tensions in global environmental justice, political ecology, and African environmentalist writing through contrapuntal dialogue among texts.

Chapter 1, “The Nature of Africa,” highlights environmentalism in Africa as a mirror of the continent as shaped by imperialism, and shows the intersections among African Literature, postcolonial criticism, and regional particularism. Global environmental justice discourse and political ecology can be brought to bear on framing

African environmental writing and exploring its significance for the conceptualization of resistance to colonial shaping.

The other three chapters focus on a different geographic scale and showcase the Green Belt Movement in East Africa, the environmental justice movement in South Africa, and the fight against petro-capitalism in the Niger Delta. Each movement engenders texts from ecocritics and environmentalists perused in relation to earlier anticolonial writings that have escaped ecocritical scrutiny. Such texts, infused with environmental justice sensibilities, caution against the reading of the apparently more centered texts as the origins and endpoints of environmental thought and representation in Africa. Brought into dialogue, these texts disrupt, deterritorialize, and reterritorialize a linear or teleological representation of the formation of African environmental aesthetics.

Chapter 2, “The Nature of African Environmentalism,” epitomizes environmental writing from East Africa with anticolonial pastoral tropes and antipastoral themes for resisting environmental injustice. It analyzes the relationships among Wangari Maathai’s work, Okot p’Bitek’s poems *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s novel *A Grain of Wheat*, and Nuruddin Farah’s novel *Secrets*. Chapter 3, “The Nature of Justice,” focuses on post-apartheid novels with fiction published before 1980 in order to scrutinize South African traditions of environmental justice writings. It features Alan Paton’s *Cry, the Beloved Country*, Bessie Head’s *When Rain Clouds Gather*, Zakes Mda’s *Heart of Redness*, and Nadine Gordimer’s *The Conservationist* and *Get a Life*. In Chapter 4, “The Nature of Violence,” Ken Saro-Wiwa’s *Genocide in Nigeria* and *A Month and a Day* come into conversation with Chinua Achebe’s *Arrow of God*, Tanure Ojaide’s poetry from *Delta Blues and Home Songs* and *Tales of the Harmattan*, and Ogaga Ifowodo’s *The Oil Lamp*. The chapter points out that such dialogue can help us create a new literary alterity consonant with environmental justice in the Niger Delta and in Africa at large.

Although Caminero-Santangelo offers readers a solid text on Atlantic Africa’s environmental literature and his insights are applicable to a broad spectrum of African environmental writing, his book falls short of exploring Francophone and Lusophone Africa where Négritude and recent postcolonial texts tackle various aspects of ecological issues on the continent. It would fully serve its purpose by not limiting the dialogue to Anglophone Africa only, but rather by extending it to Francophone and Lusophone regions of the continent where Négritude texts and the progressive aestheticization of the tropics and nature are gaining momentum through Eco-Imaginative writing. Conservationism has been highly connected with imperial capitalism in Anglophone Africa, but the human tragedy linked to the genocide wars and the unprecedented destruction of the rainforest and wildlife in the Congo by Western and Chinese extractive and logging corporations is part of the critical outlook of recent environmentalist texts, such as Assiba d’Almeida’s *Eco-Imagination: African Diasporan Literatures and Sustainability* (2010). Caminero-

Santangelo's enthusiasm for ecocriticism is obvious throughout his book, and he offers readers some of the best scholarship on African literature, environmental justice, and political ecology.

Notes

1. In *Archaeology of Atlantic Africa*, Akinwumi Ogundiran emphasizes the comparative, empirical, and conceptual nature of Atlantic perspectives in African and African Diaspora archaeology. He writes: "We have defined Atlantic Africa in this volume to include not only the coastal regions and the hinterlands of western Africa but also the eastern and southern African coasts and their hinterlands" (5).

Works Cited

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