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Afterword: Reckoning with Irreversibilities in Biotic and Political Ecologies

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Abstract: In this Afterword to *ARIEL*'s special issue on postcolonial ecocriticism, Estok notes that among the reasons for the enduring effects of colonialism is the irreversible nature of so much of the social and environmental changes and damages it brought. Estok shows that reckoning with the environmental and social effects of colonialism means engaging in a long and slow task but with an imperative for urgency. Such reckoning must (as one of the main purposes of this special issue claims) continue discussions of the Global South in postcolonial ecocriticism, and it must do so in ways that are more inclusive of local manifestations, such as the North/South chasm *within* North America. Such reckoning acknowledges that there is profound importance (as the contributors maintain) in discussing official histories through personal ones, in working with less familiar works and experimental writings, and in considering alternative methodologies and subject matter. Such attention will open postcolonial ecocriticism to genres and forms that perhaps would not get the attention they deserve otherwise. This work will widen the field of enquiry for postcolonial ecocriticism.

Keywords: postcolonial ecocriticism, colonialism, environmentalism, globalization, ecophobia



However we come to the question of postcolonial studies at this historical juncture, there are two phenomena, both topics of public debate since the early 1990s, that none of us can quite escape in our personal and collective lives at present: globalization and global warming. All thinking about the present has to engage both. (Chakrabarty 1)

I was barely out of high school when I became involved in the fight to save Meares Island and Clayoquot Sound from the now defunct MacMillan Bloedel and their hired chainsaws. Meares Island and Clayoquot Sound in British Columbia possess some of the largest remaining unlogged ancient temperate rainforests in the world. The title owners of the land were and remain the First Nations Ahousaht, Tlalo-qui-aht, Hesquiat, Toquaht, and Ucluelet, not the Canadian forestry giant MacMillan Bloedel, and it is therefore almost incomprehensible that the fight should have taken so long, a fight that is still not over. The protests in the mid-1980s were intense and involved people from all walks of life, with close cooperation between First Nations and non-Aboriginal activists, protests that were to result finally in the declaration of Clayoquot Sound as a Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO in 2000. It was a great step. But it will not and cannot reverse previous logging and bring back the trees that are already gone. Moreover, “while [this UNESCO nomination was] a huge step forward, [it] did not provide legislated protection for all the unlogged watersheds in Clayoquot Sound” (Wilderness Committee). Legislated protection for Clayoquot’s ancient forests remains elusive, as does the enforcement of the title owners’ rights over the land itself.

Meares Island and Clayoquot Sound perhaps need footnoting, some sort of glossing for nonlocals that would explain what they are, why they were and are important, and how it is that discussion of them is appropriately prefaced by the quotation above from Dipesh Chakrabarty.¹ The particularity and specificity of place—not to mention the peoples and their names—are less familiar than the mega-stories: the polar bears and their melting ice, the rising sea levels, and so on. Nothing in my personal experience has been more symptomatic of the mutual entanglements of postcolonial and environmental matters implied in Chakrabarty’s comments on globalization. Postcolonial ecocriticism addresses the legacies of colonization, the joint oppressions of the original owners of the land and of that land itself, and the simultaneously local and global impacts of clear-cutting the forests of the Pacific Northwest.

Environmental problems, in some senses, affect all people and defy boundaries of nation, creed, race, ideology, gender, sexuality, class,

and so on; yet although they are insistently global, environmental crises are nevertheless unequally and inequitably distributed (are, in other words, raced, gendered, classed, sexualized) and affect us all differently. This is a key insight of the environmental justice movement. Similarly, environmental crises evoke situated responses that are neither singular nor unmediated. Yet postcolonial theory and ecocriticism were slow to meet. What lies behind the “ten-year lag,” as Ursula Heise describes the meeting of ecocriticism and postcolonial literary theory (“Globality” 638), is important because these responses to global environmental and social injustices are as much a part of the future as of the past. It is not an easy future for postcolonial ecocriticism but rather one in which “both modes of inquiry find themselves facing challenges based on the decidedly political and potentially activist nature of their foci” (Wright 3). It is a future, as all of the articles in this special issue of *ARIEL* show, that is situated on ground overwrought and overrun with various irreversible invasions (cultural, species), shifting and unstable soils in which profound power struggles continue to play out. If two ongoing trends stand out more than any others in the articles of this special issue, they are the legacy of irreversibility and the continuing power struggles that characterize the postcolonial environment.

Understanding the past—and in the case of this special issue, specifically the delayed meeting of postcolonial and ecocritical collaborations—is central to ensuring a future. Among the many possible reasons behind the delayed meeting of ecocriticism and postcolonialism, Rob Nixon’s oft-quoted outline of four basic differences between postcolonial and ecocritical approaches remains a useful guide for understanding why collaboration between the two fields took so long. Emphasizing differences in thinking on matters such as purity, place, nation, and history,² Nixon offers important insights that help foster conversation between the two subject areas.

Continuing the conversation, Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin add that despite the abundance of definitions for postcolonialism and ecocriticism, “the two fields are most alike in suffering from a seemingly congenital inability to account for themselves” and that for both, defini-

tions seem an “insuperable problem” (“Green” 8). Both postcolonial literary studies and ecocriticism have traditionally resisted definition—at least in the sense of the artificially static ones that critics seem to desire. In the plainest of terms, postcolonial literary studies and ecocriticism are kinetic, not static: Heise reminds us “that both postcolonialism and ecocriticism have undergone various phases of theorization, critique, and countercritique that in some cases have modified initial theoretical stances substantially” (“Globality” 254). When Nixon muses on “the mutually constitutive silences that have developed between environmental and postcolonial literary studies” (“Environmentalism” 235), it is with an eye to moving beyond silences produced by resistance to static definition.

Indeed, much has changed for postcolonial ecocriticism over the past several years. The 2013 Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) Biennial Conference boasted about two dozen panels on the topic, variously defined. If there had been, as Nixon suggests, a “postcolonialist dismissal of environmentalism as marginal to ‘real’ politics,” a time when “postcolonial literary critics . . . tended to shy away from environmental issues as if they were soft, Western bourgeois concerns” (242), then such a time has clearly passed, and “the notion that environmental politics are a luxury politics for the world’s wealthy is clearly untenable” (242). It has been a hard-won battle to make this the case, and the cooperation between the two fields has been long in the making. A burst of articles around the mid-2000s (from Ursula Heise, Rob Nixon, Graham Huggan, Helen Tiffin, Susie O’Brien, and others) has produced what Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley have termed “a remarkable turn in which ecocritical methodologies have been adapted for rethinking postcolonial literature as well as a recognition on the part of mainstream American ecocritics of the need to engage in more globally nuanced terms” (9).

As there are many reasons why ecocriticism and postcolonial theory were slow off the blocks in collaborating, so too are there many reasons why they should work in concert. The seven articles in this special issue make clear how and why such concerted work is necessary. They powerfully bring together many issues that need to be discussed in tandem.

Brian Deyo's enormously insightful expansion and theorization of the notion of ecophobia, for instance, draws vital connections displaying how "ecophobic value-systems . . . deny the value experience of indigenes peoples . . . [and] nonhuman animals." Reading J. M. Coetzee's *Dusklands*, Deyo shows convincingly how reading for ecophobia works with "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee." A nineteenth-century colonist, Jacobus defines himself as superior to the people on whose land he lives. "One is tempted, if not compelled," Deyo explains, "to read his derogatory representations of the indigene as symptoms of fear: the fear that he is, at bottom, no different, and that his pretensions to reason are none other than an expression of this fear." No less, Deyo explains, does Richard Flanagan's *Wanting* imagine "the violence of the colonial encounter as a result of the anxiety and fear that emerges amidst European settlers' perplexed reactions to the indigene's unabashed animal nature." In each case, the fear is drenched in ecophobia. By employing the specific framework of ecophobia, Deyo reveals that "colonial discourse derogates the body as wild and savage, the very locus of the beast within that threatens to disorder the rational soul, not to mention the social norms that guarantee the production, maintenance, and reproduction of colonial power."

Deyo's position attempts to answer a plea Huggan and Tiffin make in *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* about how to address one of the issues of the field: "if the wrongs of colonialism—its legacies of continuing human inequalities, for instance—are to be addressed, still less to be redressed, then the very category of the *human*, in relation to animals and the environment, must also be brought under scrutiny" (18). Taken one step further, if Ursula Heise is correct in asserting that "the question of difference in ecocriticism . . . is never purely human" ("Globality" 638), then on many different fronts, the obviously overlapping concerns of postcolonial and ecocritical theory with the nonhuman and posthuman warrant considerable attention. Addressing one of these, Filippo Menozzi in his contribution to this special issue credibly shows that representations of the roots and dynamics of species invasion "in postcolonial literatures remains, to a large extent, to be investigated" and reveals how "the literary figuration of biological invasiveness is a site

where the legacy of colonialism is shown at work on multiple levels or planes, from politics to nature.”

Arguing that “the problem of invasive species is one of the most pressing environmental concerns today,” Menozzi reviews the by-now established arguments that “the link between invasive species and the history of colonization is deep and intimate” and how “introduced species and pathogenic agents were not always an involuntary side-effect of colonial expansion but were in many cases a conscious, deliberate act central to the project of imperialism.” Menozzi’s significant addition to the discussion is his application of the idea of deterritorialization, a concept developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in order to show the importance of matters of unequal power and vulnerability inherent in the topic of invasive species. The conscious and deliberate use of flora and fauna to announce and secure colonial power is apparent not only in the context of Australia and South Africa, which Menozzi discusses, but also where I work in South Korea.

As I have elsewhere recited (see “Partial Views” 2–3), an incident involving invasive species in Seoul speaks volumes on the complexity of preservation. I was on an early morning run along the Cheongnyang Stream beside my residence when I saw something I initially thought very disturbing. Over the years, I had planted indigenous trees beside that stream in the early hours—illegally, I suppose, since it is public grounds. Not all have lived, but some are now twenty feet tall. Before dawn one morning in July 2007, I was running beside the stream and nodding to all of the other early morning runners in this dense city (with its metro population of 25 million). There was a man with a saw cutting down Acacia trees. I was astounded. There was a line of ten that he had already cut down along a hundred meter stretch beside the stream. No one said anything. People tend to mind their own business in Seoul. I asked him angrily in Korean what he was doing. He responded that Japan had stripped the land of vegetation and seeded Acacia in many places as a part of the colonizing process. Acacia, an invasive species, now dominates many mountains in Korea. As Frantz Fanon famously explains in *The Wretched of the Earth*, “For a colonized people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and

foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity” (34). Except for blurting something about Fanon, my brain wasn’t working well enough so early in the morning for me to formulate an intelligible response to the man with his saw. I ran on, doubting that anyone would have seen his actions as wrong—indeed, doubting myself that they were wrong, doubting the applicability of the very notions of right and wrong in this case. His actions were bound up with questions about history, national identity, ecological preservation, power, pride, fear, resistance, and many other things.

Even so, some kinds of succession cannot be reversed. Such is the power of the invaders. There are new balances and ecosystems that form: the Acacia in Korea, the Himalayan blackberry in the Pacific Northwest, and the black rat just about everywhere are examples of invasive species that cannot feasibly be extricated from the environments to which they have been introduced. Nature improvises, as Slavoj Žižek reminds us. We are not the first, nor the last agents of mass destruction and extinction. The world is a series of successions.

To make an analogy between natural succession³ on the one hand and cultural or ethnic succession on the other, however, would be to make a faulty generalization. Fenn Stewart speaks directly to this false analogy in her analysis of how Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s *Song of Hiawatha* has been used within a history of colonialism in Canada. Embedded in a process of colonization that continues today, Longfellow’s work has been appropriated with both colonizing and decolonizing in mind, both by “narratives [that] work to naturalize the presence of white settlers . . . by obscuring the historical and on-going violence and illegality of settler colonialism” and by writers who “critique . . . settler resource extraction and colonial assimilation in the context of Northern Ontario.” Indeed, narratives that seek to naturalize cultural or ethnic succession ignore and obscure their own motivations (racism, ethnocentrism, xenophobia, and perhaps some versions of topophobia and ecophobia).

Stewart’s extensive discussions of “interconnected forms of theft” and of how “race and indigenusness have long been central to the construction of iconic . . . wilderness spaces” reiterate concerns about the inextricability and often irreversibility both of invasive species and of

colonialist legacies. So too in Sarah Groeneveld's article are these concerns present. As Groeneveld explains in her discussion of Canadian poet Angela Rawlings and linguistic violence, "imposed language can be like an invasive species, killing that which is native to the environment and becoming impossible to weed out." There is both a representation of violence and a violence of representation involved in the writing of settled environments. Of the former, Groeneveld explains that "settled environments become spaces that evoke fear," a kind of production of ecophobia; of the latter, she expands on the work of Alan Lawson and explains that "it is language itself that is creating or insisting on the empty landscape that is available for settlement."

Place and space are central to Groeneveld's discussions, and indeed all of the articles in this issue highlight the centrality of such concerns in postcolonial ecocriticisms. Camille van der Marel takes on these matters directly and shows that the "unacknowledged environment-based rupture between Canada's southern and northern experiences of colonization calls postcolonial approaches' largely anthropocentric understandings of colonial relations into question by demonstrating how certain landscapes . . . intrinsically resist colonizing epistemologies." Van der Marel suggests that there are "few models address[ing] whether resistances can . . . be enacted by physical landscapes . . . on the practices central to colonial ideology." What there are of such resistances "shapes how . . . landscapes are later incorporated into the national narratives of former (settler) colonies." Place is indeed important in postcolonial studies, as DeLoughrey and Handley explain:

postcolonial studies has [sic] utilized the concept of place to question temporal narratives of progress imposed by colonial powers. . . . Place encodes time, suggesting that histories embedded in the land and sea have always provided vital and dynamic methodologies for understanding the transformative impact of empire and the anticolonial epistemologies it tries to suppress. (4).

Colonialism has subsided considerably, but the social and environmental effects of colonialism, as all of the contributors to this volume

show, still urgently need attention. More than fifty years ago, Fanon claimed, “The basic duel which seemed to be that between colonialism and anti-colonialism, and indeed between capitalism and socialism, is already losing some of its importance. What counts today, the question which is looming on the horizon, is the need for a redistribution of wealth. Humanity must reply to this question, or be shaken to pieces by it” (77–78). The argument here—and it is one that remains urgent today—is not that discussion of colonialism is unimportant but, on the contrary, that it is a root cause of many of the inequitable distributions of wealth and power in the world today. Although we can plausibly argue that colonialism has subsided, it is hardly a tenable position to argue that it is over and done with, a point Groeneveld makes clearly: it is difficult to use the term “postcolonial” to describe a “nation such as Canada in which no easily definable independence movement has marked the colonial as definitively ‘post’ and where indigenous communities still live within the structures of an imposed government.” The queen of England, for instance, remains on Canadian currency. It is difficult to imagine a postcolonial nation such as Korea using money that has Japanese royalty on it. Indeed, for all of the talk about settling Canada, much remains unsettled. The “violent history of settlement and colonialism” has left the original inhabitants in the most unsettled of positions for the past five hundred years or so. The violence of colonialism remains very much a continuing process. Indeed, there is more cause now than ever to listen to the lament of Jacques Derrida that

[n]ever have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, and thus economic oppression affected as many human beings in the history of the earth and of humanity. . . . [N]o degree of progress allows one to ignore that never before, in absolute figures, have so many men, women and children been subjugated, starved or exterminated on the earth. (85)

It is not just colonization begun long ago and continuing to this day but also colonization’s sleazy siblings war and terrorism that account for the enormous environmental and social injustices that warrant Derrida’s observations. The current and past wars that have sought to establish or

to maintain colonial privilege and authority have created a very dreary future, one based on unsustainable ideologies.

The globality of capitalism and the unsustainability of capitalist ideals of acquisition and plunder, profit and growth, and exploitation and control are obviously integral to the joint colonialist exploitations of people and land. There are huge inequalities in income, privileges, access to safe food and water, rights to clean air, and so on that are only getting worse as fully industrialized nations continue to ignore their share of the various burdens that are exported and out-sourced. We need to remember that all of the talk and subsequent action about the redistribution of wealth are only cosmetic and temporary solutions. It is the model creating such inequities that needs to be re-tooled or dismantled. It is the very production of such wealth on ever-increasing scales that is unsustainable. For all of the talk about conservation and sacrifice and about “re-distributing” wealth, we seem to be missing the target, seem to be consistently unable to address the causes, seem able only to deal with the effects, seem not willing to question our very terms of engagement with the problems. The very notion of “re-distributing” implies and reinforces the notion of an agential center and passive, peripheral recipients who will benefit from “re-distribution” but with the causal structures finally remaining intact and unquestioned.

As various nations pursue their rights to have what Americans have and to live as Americans live, the problems of the American model become much more focused and clear. Of course, inequities must be addressed by more equal distributions of wealth, but this also means more equal distributions of poverty. “Developed” nations need—and this is implied in all discourses on sustainability—to sacrifice, need to give up unsustainable practices.⁴ Fully industrialized nations would do well to adapt sustainable practices from other cultures rather than to wipe out those cultures with blueprints of unsustainability. This is a running theme in this special issue. Kylie Crane’s discussions of the commemoration of the establishment of colonies in Western Australia, for instance, are telling here. The annual “cutting down of a tree as the symbolic act of the establishment of [this] colony” is a gesture that places “indigenous cultures under erasure . . . [and] celebrates the destruction of the envi-

ronment as a constitutive act of state.” A very different motive indeed to cut down trees from that of the man along the stream in Seoul cutting down Acacias—or of the hired chainsaws on Meares Island.

If one of the arguments of current postcolonial ecocriticism has been that “most of the recent scholarship theorizing the development of ecocriticism and environmentalism has positioned Europe and the United States as the epistemological centers, while the rest of the world has, for material or ideological reasons, been thought to have arrived belatedly, or with less focused commitment, to an ecologically sustainable future” (DeLoughrey and Handley 8),⁵ then no less is it true, as this special issue shows convincingly, that *within* North America there remains a need for comparative approaches. As the articles in this collection display, there is—as the increasing publications in Inuktituk and Cree, for instance, among other Indigenous writings indicate—room for a comparative literature that doesn’t leave North America.

It is gratifying to hear discussion of the Global South in postcolonial ecocriticism, indeed, but there is also a North/South chasm within North America. This special issue takes us further toward recognizing and addressing this matter, does much to extend the reach of both postcolonial criticism and ecocriticism, and in many ways responds to Nixon’s observation that “the isolation of postcolonial literary studies from environmental concerns has limited the field’s intellectual reach” (“Environmentalism” 247). Hedley Twidle’s “Reading *Silent Spring* from the Global South” in this volume does much to make connections among points in this broadening ecocritical reach. Twidle’s discussion of Carson’s “sedimentary poetics,” of her “slow, patient accumulation of detail,” is important work against the “slow violence” Nixon describes, the “threats that take time to wreak their havoc, threats that never materialize in one spectacular, explosive, cinematic scene” (*Slow Violence* 14). Still, there is much work to be done. This special issue reiterates the importance of the realness of the world and of the problems in it. Kylie Crane’s stress on the importance of seeing “parallels between the arcs of official history and personal history” is one that this “Afterword” echoes, beginning as it does and continuing throughout with personal anecdotes. For Crane, “[t]o stress personal narratives is to stress the stakes of

being human in a postcolonial world.” At the same time, a “postcolonial ecocriticism . . . must be more than a simple extension of postcolonial methodologies into the realm of the human material world; it must reckon with the ways in which ecology does not always work within the frames of human time and political interest” (DeLoughrey and Handley 4), ways of the “slow violence” about which Nixon speaks. Reckoning with the environmental and social effects of colonialism means engaging in a long and slow task but with an imperative for urgency. It means reckoning with the past and with things that have changed and cannot be changed back. It means making the best of things in social and physical environments where there are horrific and irreversible damages.

Notes

- 1 Meares Island is located in Clayoquot Sound on the west coast of Canada’s Vancouver Island. In 1984, the Nuu-chah-nulth people began protesting against MacMillan Bloedel’s plans to log the island. The issue eventually went to court, resulting in the first ever ruling against the British Columbia government and in favor of the First Nations people’s rights, based on a land claim. Clayoquot Sound is the body of water containing several islands (one of which is Meares Island) and inlets that holds B.C.’s largest tracts of unlogged forests. Clayoquot Sound became B.C.’s first UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve.
- 2 Nixon argues that “postcolonialists have tended to foreground hybridity and cross-culturation,” while ecocritics “have historically been drawn to discourses of purity” and “uncorrupted” spaces; postcolonialists have been concerned with displacement, ecocritics with embeddedness and place; postcolonialists with “the cosmopolitan and the transnational, ecocritics and environmental literature more “within a national (and often nationalistic) American framework”; postcolonialists with recovering history, ecocritics with transcending history (“Environmentalism” 235). Not intended as absolute comments on either field, these four “schisms” are a good step forward.
- 3 Morton and Žižek both remind us in varying ways that “[n]ature itself is not natural” (Žižek). I use the term “natural succession” loosely here to describe rebalances that derive from invasive species, whether or not these invasive species are introduced by human or by nonhuman forces.
- 4 For two weeks in the Fall of 2013, as I walked into my sabbatical office at Shanghai Normal University, a man kneeled from 8:00 in the morning until 4:00 in the afternoon plucking weeds from the grassy common in front of the Wen Yuan Lou (The Humanities Building). In North America, such employment wouldn’t be funded, and the task of de-weeding would be relegated to some bottle of

herbicide. One might of course ask whether weeding on a university campus is necessary at all. Nevertheless, I wondered—as I walked through the Shanghai smog (which reached staggeringly hazardous levels in 2013)—what the global scramble to live like Americans means and what it would mean for Americans to live like Chinese. Notwithstanding the smog, the ecological footprint of the average person in China (even—perhaps especially—in big cities) is much smaller than the ecological footprint of the average person in the US.

- 5 I made my own perspective on this topic known early, mentioning the “uniformly Americanist slant” of ecocriticism nervously as a young scholar in a 1996 review of Buell’s *The Environmental Imagination*—a remark that undoubtedly went unnoticed and probably unread (“Review” 1244). The now much-discussed Americanism of ecocriticism is no doubt a reflection of ecocriticism’s own history, itself a result of what Arac has called a “global hegemony of the English language” (20). Heise observed in 2008 that “monolingualism is currently one of ecocriticism’s most serious limitations. The environmentalist ambition is to think globally, but doing so in terms of a single language is inconceivable—even and especially when that language is a hegemonic one” (“Hitchhiker’s” 513). Even within North America, monolingualism muffles voices—a matter this special issue is committed to addressing.

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