

**Elizabeth DeLoughrey & George B. Handley (eds.)**

*Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. xi + 348 pp. (Paper US\$ 24.95)

Readers of the *New West Indian Guide* might be surprised to see a generalist-sounding volume entitled *Postcolonial Ecologies* reviewed in a journal devoted to Caribbean studies. The table of contents of this collection of essays does not resolve the apparent riddle, as only four of the fourteen chapter titles address the Caribbean directly. However the solid introduction by editors Elizabeth DeLoughrey & George B. Handley highlights the important role played in the development of postcolonial ecocriticism by such thinkers as Guyanese Wilson Harris, St. Lucian Derek Walcott, and above all Martinican Édouard Glissant (to whose memory the book is dedicated). Admittedly, all postcolonial literatures have long displayed an historicizing interest in the land and its relations with the trauma of colonialism. Nevertheless the prominence of Caribbean thought in the ecocritical field can be explained by what Glissant has called the region's violent "irruption into modernity" which "created a schism between nature and culture in the region that its literature sought to bridge" (p. 27)—a contention that was the foundation of a 2005 anthology edited by DeLoughrey, Handley, and Renée Gosson entitled *Caribbean Literature and the Environment: Between Nature and Culture*.

Starting from the common ground between ecological and postcolonial thought (e.g., a concern for the connections between geography and otherness), the introduction undertakes a critical comparison of the various epistemologies at work within the different brands of environmentalism. This enlightening, well-documented discussion is, like the rest of the volume, marked by a refusal to homogenize and a desire to tackle the complex interdependence of binaries inherited from the Enlightenment such as metropole and colony, global and local, or hybridity and purity. The intention of the editors, who use Glissant's theory of "an aesthetics of the earth" as a stepping stone, is less to denounce the universalizing and dominating tendencies of some Western, often American, forms of ecocriticism than to "broaden the historical, theoretical, and geographic scope of contributions to ecocritical thought" (p. 16)—with the laudable aim of disturbing existing taxonomies and steering clear of simplifying approaches, such as what has been called "Green Orientalism" (pp. 18, 20).

The volume is organized in four thematic sections exploring the multiple but interacting facets of postcolonial ecology and, in most cases, underscoring the peculiar environmental vulnerability of poorer countries. The first part, "Cultivating Places," is comprised of three essays focusing on the representa-

tion of flora and the role that art—whether literature (by Kiran Desai and Derek Walcott) or painting (by Hector Hyppolite, Wilson Bigaud, and Henry Nickson)—can play in fostering awareness about the abuse of the land (caused by colonialism and later tourism), and even more importantly in offering subversive rethinking of the complex relationships between people and their environment.

The second section, “Forest Fictions,” centers on forests, not only their greed-induced destruction, but also their ability to raise questions about indigeneity, identity construction, and the intricate relationship between nature and culture. As Handley shows in his dense analysis of Alejo Carpentier’s *The Lost Steps*, the latter issue can be perceived in its full complexity if it is apprehended through ambivalent texts that are not simply mimetic but develop some form of poetics. Or again, Jennifer Wenzel’s subtle reading of a short story by Mahasweta Devi suggests seeing it through texts that “make their interventions not as empirical evidence of ecological crisis nor as ready-made blueprints for action ... but rather through their particularly literary mediations” (p. 151). Most of the novels and poems analyzed in the different contributions match these descriptions.

The four essays of the third section, “The Lives of (Nonhuman) Animals,” revolve around fauna rather than flora. Various examining the representation of game reserves in post-Apartheid South Africa, the cetacean turn in fiction, the status of animals in J.M. Coetzee’s work, and the transpersonality caused by the Bhopal tragedy in a novel by Indra Sinha, this section reminds us of how intertwined the fates of humans and animals are. It also stresses the political and ethical potential of this often complex alliance in terms of sustainability, survival, and rights.

The fourth section, “Militourism,” addresses neocolonial damage to the environment, whether in the form of nuclear radiation and nuclear weapons testing in the Pacific or tourism development in Sri Lanka and South Africa. Paying close attention to the history behind these ecological crises, the four contributions also comment on the way in which indigenous writers have deconstructed the military and touristic logic through local epistemologies and a postcolonial aesthetics that resist closure and narrow nationalism.

With perhaps one exception, the essays in *Postcolonial Ecologies* are solidly argued and reader-friendly, whether they are encyclopedic in nature (see the chapter by Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert) or focus on just one text. All of them testify to the formidable richness and the great relevance of the postcolonial approach to environmental issues. This original and wide-ranging collection, which will no doubt become a standard text in the field, also makes a strong case for the active participation of the humanities in general, and literature in

particular, in the debate around the state of our planet which has all too often been the preserve of the so-called hard sciences.

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