

Natures of Africa. Ecocriticism and Animal Studies in Contemporary Cultural Forms.

Fiona Moolla, ed.

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Do we really need another book about environmental degradation? After all, we know. We may be in denial, but we know. Temperatures that beat all records, climate refugees, farmlands desertified, polar ice melt, people from the Marshall Islands writing poems about submergence, terrible pollution of earth water and air, deep forests denuded, mountains of waste on land and in the sea ... But what is *not* made clear in the mainstream media's representation of the present eco-crisis, and may even be deliberately obscured, are the political and social dimensions.

I guess the cool face of the neoliberal order, even in its environmentalist guise, does not want us to ask too many questions about the ecological and social costs of corporate globalization. Or to start seeing connections. But if this not-seeing helps to perpetuate for an over-privileged minority the toxic dream of limitless progress, then it is urgent for the rest of us to wake up, both ourselves and others. We need to wake up to the recognition that North and South are inextricable. That country and city are always one system. That nature can never be "out there". That animals are people, and people are animals. That there is no

"away" to throw our trash to.

So this is where literary and cultural studies people can bring something crucial into environmental discourse. Firstly, we work every day with imaginative texts. That is very radical. Secondly, it is our practice to ask questions, to ponder forms of representation, and to look carefully at what is left unsaid. More specifically, we have developed analytic tools that help us to recognize and interrogate the strategies of Orientalism and dualistic thought. This sort of critique can play a valuable role in informing the way the local/global crisis of environment and development is represented and understood: that the othering and exploitation of ecosystems and nonhuman beings is inseparable from the othering of people, that the violence of resource extraction is linked with violence against women, that the war against the Earth is a war against ourselves. And so on.

At the same time, when literary and cultural studies people begin to engage with eco-social thinking, this engagement can also work to re-energise the discipline. Ecology (a way of understanding the interrelationships between organisms and their environment) offers a metaphor that goes beyond critique to a kind of affirmation. Beyond the invaluable analysis of binary thinking, it speaks for paradigms of interconnectedness: the recognition of interconnectedness is the unreturnable gift of the Anthropocene. Intersectionality, we say these days, and the ecological thought gives a clear image for why it cannot be otherwise. A second way in which ecology can re-energise literary and cultural studies is in bringing to the fore new or

forgotten writing and orature about our relations with the nonhuman world: texts that use the tools of imagination to convey some form of ecological awareness, or to think about the sentience of “nature”, or to document environmental racism, or to tell a story about the end of the world, or the beginning. Our communities desperately need such texts, and we in the literary Humanities are positioned to read them usefully, and to bring them to some prominence in the public sphere.

So it is great to have another book. And how particularly great, given where we are situated right now, that it is a book of *African Ecocriticism*. If certain Anglo-European voices have tended to dominate the field so far, even when it is called Environmental Humanities or Postcolonial Ecocriticism, what is wonderful is that now we have a new collection of eco-inflected literary essays that are all about *here*, and/or written from here.

The title invokes multiplicity, and an anti-essentialist take on its subject: *Natures of Africa*: As this might suggest, the book offers no consensus on what these natures might be. Fiona Moolla mentions this in the introduction. In fact, her superb introduction is almost reason enough on its own to buy the book: a very thorough and helpful survey of the emerging territory of African ecocriticism, followed by some brilliant open-ended questions that remain as a catalyst for future work, and an incisive reflection on each chapter. It gives a good sense of what is to come in the book, not only in terms of content, but also in its enactment of the wide-ranging, precise, meticulous mind that put the col-

lection together, and no doubt combed through each contribution with unrelenting attention to the detail of presentation, expression, and argument.

So if the book offers no consensus in terms of “nature” (and that, precisely, is the point), neither does it attempt a definition of African ecocriticism. I suppose this was one of the questions that I brought to reading it: What can it tell me about what an African ecocriticism looks like? As you read the diverse contributions written by people from Kenya, Malawi, the Netherlands, Nigeria, South Africa, the USA, Zimbabwe ... and they are writing about literatures from equally diverse places in Africa, you realise that of course there is no such thing. African ecocriticism *is not a thing*. It cannot be. But what the collection does do, and quite insistently, is to ask the question: how do we write ecocriticism in Africa, and/or about African texts?

No consensus, yes. But several continuities: again and again, the contributors to *Natures of Africa* write out of a clear recognition that environmental issues are social, political, historical. That to speak these days about ecology in Africa is inevitably to speak at the same time about disempowerment and power, exploitation and agency. In *Natures of Africa*, each very different chapter enacts this recognition through finding a way to critique hierarchic dualism, and to take seriously metaphors of interconnectedness. In other words, these separate dialogues between critical academic eye and primary eco-literate content have together created a discourse that is at once eco + socio-political. It uses different strategies to convey this,

but the recurrent concern is to debunk binary thinking and to invoke a way of seeing that is nondual, interconnected.

So in chapters that reflect specifically on priorities for an African ecocriticism, Chengy Coral Wu notes that “an Africa-focused ecocriticism can remind Anglo-American ecocriticism that environments are historically and culturally situated” (136). Anthony Vital argues for an ecocriticism that explores how, via the text, both “city” and “nature” enter into subjective life (144). And Syned Mthathiwa argues that “postcolonial ecocriticism is both ecologically and politically/socially committed, as it also engages with the politics of decolonisation, especially in an African context” (253).

Other contributors use particular discussions of written and oral texts to offer a similarly politicised critique of binary thinking which at the same time affirms interconnectedness. The opening chapter on the Malian *Sunjata* epic is all about food, specifically the baobab. It is a new take on the poem and its purpose is to show how “food and foodways are the bridge between human culture and the environment” (Highfield 1). Then a reading of contemporary popular songs from Zimbabwe describes Shona society as “a land-based nature-culture”, and documents songs in which a person can be a child of the soil, and the soil itself is a being, a protagonist (Musiyiwa 23–50). In other chapters: adolescent boys from the Samburu community in Kenya sing praise poems to the ostrich, while other people sing to elephants, and no animal is referred to as “wild”; the advertising

strategies of voluntourism use “nature” in “a binary structure of meaning” to essentialise Africa, and favour the rural over the urban, and the natural over the industrial; a travel narrative from South Africa invokes “the interrelatedness of all things”, and demonstrates the links between regionalist concerns and transnational histories “of displacement and global environmental injustices” (Slabbert 164); a novel about the disastrous eco-social impact of crude oil extraction in the Niger Delta shows how “the relationship between the natural and the social [...] arguably, becomes the cardinal principle in the process of people’s identity formation” (Okuyade 189); two novels from the Cameroon and the Congo have animal narrators (a politically aware dog and a literate porcupine) that subvert the habitual human-animal binary, and offer “finally, subjects without fear of being mastered by a human” (Woodward 228); and in the last chapter, contemporary Anglophone Nigerian poetry uses a contemporary view of certain animist beliefs to embody ‘the nature-culture interdependence’ (Egya 231–49). So this is some of what an emerging African ecocriticism looks like. Diverse, yet part of one conversation about dualism and interconnectedness.

The other question I brought to reading *Natures of Africa* was, what new texts can it offer me to share with students? I believe the urgency of the present eco-social crisis requires us in the Humanities to become engaged intellectuals, and to draw on whatever resources may be available. For most of us, I think, the main interface that our research or scholarship has with

“the public” is through our teaching. And as literary and cultural studies people in particular, this work involves the rare delight of introducing young people to imaginative texts as a complex mode of knowledge. If we are to use our privileged position as a vehicle for eco-social advocacy, this teaching environment may well be our best opportunity. So I am always keen to discover new material, and this collection offers quite a lot.

The fence, the wall, the great divide. What the eco-texts explored in *Natures of Africa* demonstrate is that our best work may be to render the binary divide irrelevant: to show, unambiguously, that it really is not there. At a time when too many people want to build walls, this is something vital that writers and critics can do. So yes, we do need this book.

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Losing the Plot. Crime, Reality and Fiction in Postapartheid Writing.

Leon de Kock.

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In this wide-ranging and impressive account of postapartheid writing, De Kock describes the “dizzingly heterogeneous corpus” (1) of South African literature after apartheid with the aim of describing its distinctive features and complexity.

The methodology is straightforward. De Kock has chosen to read particular literary works in order to identify broader ideas and trends. To contextualise the study, De Kock deploys the key, pervasive notion of “transition”. The notion is variously defined as a “transformative shift from one ‘state’ to another” (2), a “popular mythology” in the “collective consciousness” (3), and as containing a counter-discourse of disillusionment or disorientation, which De Kock refers to as “‘plot loss’” (3). This “plot loss” becomes a central trope in the book to express the social and political chaos of the country, evident in various criminal manifestations of neo-colonialism such as neo-liberal economic policies, new forms of racism, and corruption. The term also refers to actual “plot loss” by authors who, struggling to express in effective and appropriate ways the disillusionment which is now intrinsic to the notion of transition, attempt nevertheless to meaningfully engage with the multiplicity of crimes which beset the nation. Postapartheid writing, De Kock argues, is, on the one hand, intensely involved in identifying wrongdoing and villains, whilst on the other hand it strives to utilise narrative to heal and inscribe new identities. In so doing, De Kock commends authors who are trying to regain the plot (a sort of national moral compass through a process of social detection) and who are concomitantly inscribing new literary plots. The many writers selected for analysis in this book are lauded for their courage and imaginative zeal in conducting social analysis in