

Thinking Globally, Acting Locally: Ecology and Human Rights in Gioconda Belli's *Waslala*¹

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DOI: [HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.37536/ECOZONA.2020.11.1.3242](https://doi.org/10.37536/ECOZONA.2020.11.1.3242)



Abstract

Gioconda Belli's futuristic novel *Waslala* reveals the many tensions that arise when one explores human rights within a context of planetary ecological crisis. While the novel criticizes human exploitation of natural resources and the resultant differential development and economic inequality, at the same time it affirms access to and control of resources as a fundamental human right. Using Steve Stern and Scott Straus's framework of the "human rights paradox" and Jason Moore's description of the "Capitalocene," I argue that *Waslala* demonstrates two fundamental tensions between human rights and environmental issues. First, the novel shows how attention to the universal principles of global ecological balance may undermine the human rights of individuals constrained by geography or economic class. Second, it demonstrates how the human right to property is implicated in global ecological crisis. Although *Waslala* purports to privilege human rights over ecological concerns, at the same time it highlights the impossibility of separating the two, prompting a rethinking of the definition and practice of human rights within the context of global ecology.

Keywords: Gioconda Belli, human rights, ecocriticism.

Resumen

Waslala, novela futurística de Gioconda Belli, revela las múltiples tensiones que surgen cuando se exploran los derechos humanos en el contexto de la crisis ecológica global. Mientras la novela critica la explotación humana de recursos naturales y la resultante desigualdad de desarrollo humano y económico, a la vez afirma el acceso a y control de los recursos como un derecho humano fundamental. Haciendo uso de las teorías de Steve Stern y Scott Straus sobre "la paradoja de los derechos humanos" y del concepto del "Capitaloceno" de Jason Moore, postulo que *Waslala* demuestra dos tensiones fundamentales entre los derechos humanos y los problemas ambientales. Primero, la novela muestra cómo atender a los principios universales del balance ecológico global puede socavar los derechos humanos de individuos limitados por razones geográficas o económicas. Segundo, demuestra cómo el derecho humano a la propiedad está implicado en la crisis ecológica global. Aunque *Waslala* intenta situar los derechos humanos por encima de los temas medioambientales, al mismo tiempo hace hincapié en la imposibilidad de separar a los dos, lo cual provoca que se reconsidere la definición y práctica de los derechos humanos dentro del contexto de la ecología global.

Palabras clave: Gioconda Belli, derechos humanos, ecocrítica.

¹ I am grateful to Victoria Christman, Andy Hageman, Elizabeth Steding, and Linda Winston for feedback during the writing process. Thanks to Mackenzie Zenk for research assistance and to the anonymous reviewers for comments that shaped the essay.

In 2008, Ecuador became the first nation in history to grant legal rights to Nature, or the Pachamama. The new Constitution included articles affirming Nature's "right to integral respect for its existence" as well as "the right to be restored." Since that landmark moment, other countries have made similar moves to recognize the rights of nonhuman entities. For example, the Whanganui river in New Zealand was granted legal personhood in 2017, thereby ending 140 years of litigation by the Maori tribe to recognize the river as an ancestor. Gerrard Albert, lead negotiator for the Whanganui tribe, celebrated the decision for dismantling "the traditional model for the last 100 years of treating [the river] from a perspective of ownership and management."² In these and other cases, the granting of rights to nonhuman beings affirms the claim that Nature should be considered a legal agent. At the same time, bestowing rights traditionally reserved for human beings to nonhuman entities questions not only the boundaries but also the established hierarchies between the human and nonhuman spheres. If rivers or mountains can be considered on equal footing as humans, what are the implications for the definition and practice of human rights?³ Can a human right to a resource such as water exist if the water itself possesses rights? How does the anthropocentric perspective of human rights relate to a biocentric view of planetary ecology?

Situated at the uncomfortable crossroads of human rights and environmental issues, Gioconda Belli's futuristic novel *Waslala* exposes the many tensions that arise when one examines human rights within a context of planetary ecological crisis. Set in a not-so-distant future, in which the world is divided between industrialized nations that have eliminated their green spaces and isolated territories that exist merely as oxygen producers and garbage dumps for developed countries, *Waslala* aims to critique the fallout of neoliberal economic policies in Latin America. In brief, developing nations must pay the price for the wasteful actions of their more developed neighbors, as regions in the global south are mandated to preserve green spaces by order of the Environmental Police, the enforcement arm of a global Corporation of the Environment which controls the production of oxygen. Previous unsustainable practices in developed nations are compensated for by controlling the "progress" of others, exemplifying the lingering effects of colonial projects based on resource extraction.⁴

Yet while the novel strongly criticizes human exploitation of natural resources and the resultant differential development and economic inequality, at the same time it affirms access to and control of resources as a fundamental "human right." By critiquing consumption rather than property, *Waslala* demonstrates the paradoxes that arise when human rights are predicated upon the control of nonhuman "resources." As both human rights and global ecology are framed in terms of economy—human "worth" and natural

² Other examples of legal rights of nonhuman entities include Bolivia's 2010 "Ley de Derechos de la Madre Tierra," which guarantees Mother Earth a series of rights, including the "right to life," "right to diversity," "right to water," and "right to regenerate," among others. The Ganges River also claims legal personhood, and in July 2019, Bangladesh became the first country to grant all its rivers the same legal status as humans.

³ The nonhuman sphere also includes sentient beings such as animals.

⁴ For more on colonialism and resource extractivism, see DeLoughrey and Handley, Nixon, and Shiva.

“resources”—the novel exposes the fissures between “thinking globally” and “acting locally.” Mindful of how ecological crisis is both interpreted and experienced differently in the developed and developing worlds, *Waslala* reveals two tensions between environmental issues and human rights. First, the novel shows how attention to the universal principles of planetary ecological balance may undermine the human rights of individuals constrained by geography or economic class.⁵ Second, it demonstrates how attention to the human right to property is implicated in global ecological crisis. The novel therefore illustrates not only how global ecology and human rights are fundamentally interconnected, but how the universal ideals underpinning both concepts pull in opposite directions. In brief, although *Waslala* purports to privilege human rights over ecological concerns, at the same time it highlights the impossibility of separating the two, prompting a rethinking of the definition and practice of human rights within the context of global ecology.

The Paradoxical “Nature” of Human Rights and Ecology

Both human rights and planetary ecological crisis may best be understood through what historian Steve Stern and sociologist Scott Straus term a “double-pull” between global and local (22). In *The Human Rights Paradox*, Stern and Straus note that while human rights are universal—rooted in principles that transcend specific contexts—local conditions determine how rights are defined, interpreted or addressed, and this double-pull between global and local informs any analysis of the landscape of human rights (9). Applying this concept to ecological issues, the idea of the “Anthropocene,” the proposed geologic era marked by human impact on climate, represents the global aspect of the double-pull, due to its far-reaching scale. As Mark Anderson explains in his introduction to *Ecological Crisis and Cultural Representation in Latin America*, the current ecological crisis flattens an understanding of both space and time: temporally, the concept of the Anthropocene conceives of ecological processes on a geologic rather than human timeframe; meanwhile, the interconnectedness of globalization causes a loss of a sense of place. The local emerges with the parallel idea that not all of humanity has impacted the planet equally, and one must consider local environments and different cultural groups when analyzing ecological crisis. In other words, flattening all the “Anthropos” into one group (thinking globally) ignores differential development and fundamental inequalities at the local level.

Anderson’s central question: “how does concern for local environments and cultural groups intersect with the vastness of planetary ecological crisis?” (xxi) echoes the

⁵ This first paradox has received the majority of critical attention. For an exploration of how *Waslala* exemplifies “third wave ecocriticism” by rejecting “neo-imperialist anti-development”, see DeVries. For more discussion of how the novel critiques first world environmentalism, see Barbas-Rhoden, “Greening Central American Literature.” See also Chapter 4 of Barbas-Rhoden, *Ecological Imaginations in Latin American Fiction*.

one posed by Stern and Straus regarding the understanding of human rights.⁶ Just as universal human rights are informed by local conditions, global ecological issues intersect with local environments. Looking at *Waslala* through this framework of global versus local highlights the double-pull between universal concepts related to planetary ecological balance and the pressing daily needs of individuals struggling for survival and for whom a more universal view seems a luxury.

Through its treatment of this tension, *Waslala* appears to exemplify what scholars Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey and George B. Handley refer to as an “aesthetics of the earth” in environmental literature of the global south (36). Given the central role environmental issues have played in empire building, DeLoughrey and Handley explain the postcolonial suspicion that surrounds any privileging of planetary ecological crisis;⁷ a focus on the global at the expense of the local is at best elitist and at worst a form of what Richard Grove terms “green imperialism.” An “aesthetics of the earth” resists such elitist tendencies, for it “calls attention to the universalizing impulses of the global” (DeLoughrey and Handley 36). By highlighting the dangers of attending primarily to planetary ecology and repeatedly insisting on the importance of considering local concerns, Belli’s novel shines a spotlight on the universalizing impulses of global ecology, even as it reveals the concomitant universalizing impulses of human rights.

People versus Principles Part I: Global Ecology, Local Rights

Waslala is set in the fictional region of Faguas (a clear pseudonym for Nicaragua), one of the marginalized green spaces reserved for oxygen production and waste depository for the developed world. It tells the story of Melisandra, a young woman who goes in search of Waslala, a mythical utopian community established by a group of poets, which vanished mysteriously along with all its inhabitants. Accompanied by a foreign journalist appropriately named Raphael, her quest to find the lost land takes her to the corrupt heart of her country, where powerful drug lords control both the economy and the populace. Melisandra’s search for Waslala becomes a journey to create a brighter future for the inhabitants of her country, who struggle against both local corruption and global politics that have caused widespread environmental degradation as well as the stark imbalance of political and economic power.

⁶ For more on this global/local tension in the context of ecology, see Morton’s *The Ecological Thought*. Morton argues that a consideration of ecological issues necessitates contemplating both the vastness of the planet and local concerns. However, he posits that most conceptions of nature or ecology imagine a position “outside” from which to analyze relationships between human and nonhuman, without recognizing that this “outside” position is both impossible to attain and necessarily anthropocentric.

⁷ Many scholars of postcolonial theory have noted how the ecological movement has traditionally been associated with North America and Northern Europe, meaning there has been a notable blind spot regarding the global south. The call for “deep ecology,” for example, has been viewed as simply another form of colonialism, as it implies imposing a foreign model of empire on former colonies. For an excellent discussion of the ways in which ecological criticism and postcolonialism differ, see Nixon’s “Environmentalism and Postcolonialism.” For a discussion of how patents and intellectual property rights over biotechnology embody a new form of colonialism, see Shiva, *Biopiracy*.

Waslala highlights the many paradoxes of the double-pull of “thinking globally” (attending to principles) and “acting locally” (attending to people), revealing how a commitment to a higher cause often leads to unintended consequences that undermine or question the universal ideal. First, the novel articulates a tension between a global need for oxygen production and local demands for livelihood. *Waslala* makes clear that the needs of the planet trump those of the people of Faguas when it comes to decisions regarding the management of natural resources. By arranging a situation in which oxygen is exchanged for electricity and other goods from the First World, the Corporation of the Environment ensures that Faguas and other “oxygen-producing nations” do not maintain local control over their own territory. Helicopter patrols search for illegal logging, while acts of “ecological terrorism” such as incinerating areas of forest are severely punished with sanctions affecting the distribution of electricity or other material goods (Belli 110). Developed nations maintain strict control over the management of timber resources, thereby ensuring that places such as Faguas remain in a state of perpetual underdevelopment. The Corporation of the Environment serves as an updated colonial power, replacing resource extraction with resource preservation, but to the same end of control and dominance. The ideal of “ecological balance” brings devastating consequences to the local population, for it imposes an external model of conservation that Scott DeVries terms “neo-imperialist anti-development” (44).

The port of Las Luces exemplifies how this “neo-imperialist anti-development” has affected the economic progress of Faguas. When the travelers arrive to Las Luces at sundown, Raphael’s first impression of the place is of “a mirrored shantytown,” as the sun’s reflection glitters off the buildings (96).⁸ Closer inspection reveals a town constructed entirely of recycled materials, where airplane wings and submarine hatches serve as doorways, and windows are comprised of discarded computer screens and skylights. The poignantly ironic image of doors of global transit machines now embedded in place and computer screens no longer providing windows to the world emphasizes the contrast between global abundance and local poverty and also underscores Faguas’ role as serving the world’s needs rather than its own. The town embodies this contradiction between progress and poverty, with pothole-ridden roads shared by modern electric vehicles and horse-drawn carts, prompting Raphael to muse that Las Luces represents an intersection “between human habitat and garbage dump” (99). Although Las Luces exhibits evidence of technological development, the omnipresent dust bathes the town “in a sepia tone,” which Raphael describes as “the light of past times” (100); Faguas literally appears to exist in a former era.

Although painfully aware of global economic inequalities, even the protagonist Melisandra voices the perspective of the Corporation of the Environment, stating “It’s much more logical to use [recycled] materials in place of wood [...] It’s more important for the trees to produce oxygen]” (98). Yet the same “logic” that prohibits the construction of

⁸ All translations from the Spanish are my own.

wooden homes also leads to widespread poverty and corruption. Unable to utilize their natural resources for any type of production other than oxygen, the inhabitants of Faguas subsist within a makeshift economy. Some make their living sorting through the tons of trash that arrive daily in barges from the developed world, rescuing or repurposing the detritus to sell. Others resort to less legal opportunities for advancement, including the cultivation of filina, a hybrid of marijuana and cocaine, the strong demand for which in the developed world has caused a healthy network of trafficking in the region. The production and transport of filina generates conflict between rival factions and has resulted in the consolidation of power in the hands of the Espada brothers, drug lords who install and remove governments at their will and ensure that the country remains in a state of permanent armed conflict. The global demand for filina, coupled with the lack of opportunities for economic advancement, preserves the imbalance of power between Faguas and the rest of the developed world.

This interplay between global and local also manifests itself through the characters that populate the novel's pages. The visitors who arrive at Melisandra's home on the river are all foreigners from the more developed world: a journalist and a scientist from the United States, two Dutch women, and a gold dealer from Germany. Even the representative from the Spanish-speaking world hails from Argentina, considered more European than other Latin American nations (and which merits its own name in the novel, rather than a pseudonym like "Faguas"). The problematic power relationship between Faguas and the surrounding world plays out among the characters as well, as the majority of the visitors are smugglers who remove minerals and other resources from the country in exchange for arms and coveted merchandise from the developed world (19). Described as the root cause of some of the country's biggest problems, these individuals seek financial enrichment for themselves at the expense of the local population, whom they hope will "sell themselves to the highest bidder" (18). The same regions that once exploited Faguas in order to facilitate their own development are now linked to the Corporation of the Environment's current policies of preservation of green space.

At the same time that the novel critiques differential development, *Waslala* also indicates that technological solutions from the developed world cannot simply be imported to Faguas. Put simply, the principle of progress (seen in advanced technology) does not always serve the needs of local inhabitants. For example, the traditional mode of river transport, the bongo—a shallow vessel powered by rowers—proves superior than modernized boats. Experiments with hovercraft-type vessels propelled by airplane engines failed, as increased speed precluded maneuverability, and ultimately "nothing had been able to match the efficiency of the primitive crafts" (67). Updated with a few modern touches—a transparent covering that provides sun protection yet allows unimpeded views of the scenery, and nightlights powered by rechargeable batteries—the bongos survived "almost unaltered" (68) due to the craft's ability to adapt to "the humors and differing depths of the river, as well as the abuse of the river captains" (67). The novel implies that any solutions to Faguan problems must respond to local needs, thereby

questioning the doctrine that external definitions of “progress” equal better living.⁹ In the double-pull of (universal) principles versus (local) people, *Waslala* indicates that people come first.

Belli's novel clearly demonstrates how overconsumption and greed in the developed world have led to environmental disaster, the effects of which disproportionately affect the people of Faguas. In this, the work makes visible what Rob Nixon has termed “slow violence,” a non-spectacular violence caused by environmental degradation, the consequences of which may be hidden or invisible due to the temporal distance between cause and effect (Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*). This slow violence is perhaps best seen in the central episode of the novel: the fatal contamination of several garbage workers with Cesium-137, a toxic radioactive substance found in one of the trash containers sent from the developed world. Enamored of the beautiful glowing powder, some of the adolescent workers paint their bodies with the radioactive substance, discovering too late that their momentary diversion with what they took for “phosphorescent paint” has proved to be a fatal mistake (184). Engracia, the woman who oversees the sorting and repurposing of the garbage, is similarly contaminated, to the horror of her lover Morris, a North American scientist with a metallic arm that can measure toxins. Speaking to the exposed individuals, Morris enumerates the aftereffects of contamination: “In a few hours you will suffer vomiting, fever, headaches, burns, your skin will sting. You will lose fluids and electrolytes in your intercellular spaces, you will suffer spinal cord damage, your hair will fall out...” (185-86). His description of the prolonged process of dying emphasizes the temporal distance between cause and effect, as the deaths of the workers occur months after the radioactive material was illegally discarded. Geographical distance is also highlighted, as the garbage pickers who suffer the consequences of contamination live a world away from those who disposed of the radioactive substance. The added fact that the discarded toxin comprised part of a now-outdated remedy for cancer in the developed world further underscores the agonizing distance—both temporal and geographical—between Faguas and the rest of the world. As Melisandra poignantly and pointedly asks Raphael, “If these things happen, I wonder what all this development was for” (190).¹⁰

The episode of radioactive contamination not only exemplifies “slow violence” but also underscores the central tension between admirable principles and the ugly

⁹ For a discussion of how *Waslala* uses the science fiction genre to question technological advancement, see V. Anderson.

¹⁰ Belli includes an author's note at the conclusion of the novel that emphasizes this nonspectacular slow violence, explaining that she based this episode on a toxic event that took place in the Brazilian city of Goiania in 1987, when garbage pickers discovered a tube of brilliant blue powder and similarly celebrated the novelty. 129 people were contaminated, and seven people died, including a six-year old girl whose birthday party had been illuminated with the glow of the fascinating powder. Citing Eduardo Galeano's description of the event, Belli notes that although it was “the worst nuclear accident in the Americas” and occurred only a year after the well-publicized Chernobyl disaster, this event was condemned to oblivion (342), further underscoring the way in which such episodes of “slow violence” do not attract media attention.

consequences they may engender. The description of the incident is replete with contrasts between the stunning beauty of the radioactive material and the dire results of its manipulation. As Melisandra contemplates the contaminated bodies, she thinks, “They looked so beautiful. Engracia seemed like an ancient Goddess, terrible and magnanimous, recently arrived after a starry journey. The boys had the magnificence and lightness of androgynous ephebes who had emerged from the sacred forest [...] It was difficult to imagine that something so beautiful was deadly” (187). The remainder of the scene develops this contrast between beauty and ugliness, as the characters spend the evening dancing and singing in a gorgeously tragic affirmation of their lives.

The contrast between the beauty and ugliness seen in the incident of radioactive contamination mirrors a wider distinction between worthy principles and harmful effects that is developed in *Waslala*. In several key moments the novel emphasizes the ethical imperative to choose people over principles. For example, as a journalist, Raphael repeatedly faces a conflict between his obligation to the story and his responsibility to the human subjects whose lives are affected by his reporting. When faced with a choice to broadcast a news story about the illegal cultivation of filina in Timbú, a community of orphans who raise the drug for survival, he ponders these dueling obligations. Krista, a Dutch woman who has traveled to Timbú to adopt an infant, warns Raphael that if he publishes the report the environmental police will burn the plantations, effectively eliminating the only source of income for the village. When Raphael makes the moral argument “While the orphans live off of the cultivation of filina, their idyllic existence is tainted with perversity. In fact they are the Espada brothers’ accomplices,” Krista counters that sending toxic garbage is equally immoral, and concludes: “For me principles will never come before people” (232). Caught between the admirable imperative to tell the truth and the sobering consequences of his actions, Raphael seeks a middle path, yet the narrative’s message regarding the relative value of principles versus people remains consistent.

The tension between universal principles—however admirable—and local realities occurs in several contexts in the novel, including its discussion of utopia embodied in the place of Waslala. The group of poets who founded Waslala sought a way to escape the ravages of war in their country; its structure and existence rests upon universal values of community and harmony. Yet attending to this universal goal of brotherly love signifies ignoring the immediate needs of their country, as the group believe that a new society can only flourish if cut off from existing politics and warfare. As one poet-founder proclaimed: “We need the island to build the Utopia” (53). Rather than dedicate their talents and vision to addressing the pressing issues of poverty and inequality in their country, the poets chose to cut themselves off from society and begin anew, privileging the universal values they hoped to cultivate in their isolated community rather than the local needs of the population. Their idea was to create “the original nucleus” of a society, which after several generations would be populated only by individuals “who had never known ambition, power, greed, evil” (53). However,

Melisandra's grandfather Don José, another founding member of the community, recalls that while he lived in Waslala "I began to ask myself if the cell would ever reproduce, or if perhaps there existed a danger that we would close ourselves off so much that we would repel external influences, becoming a type of modern Avalon, an island in the mist, unreachable by most mortals, an impenetrable fortress" (56). Unable to fully choose principles over people, Don José leaves the community to find Melisandra's grandmother and is never able to find his way back to Waslala. The pull between the universal ideals of the utopian vision and local concerns related to politics and governance causes an irresolvable tension summed up succinctly in Engracia's final message to Melisandra: "do not let the idea, the dream, become more important than the well-being of the most humble human being" (287).

Through its rhetoric of people before principles, *Waslala* reveals the paradoxes of thinking globally and acting locally. Akin to how the breathtakingly beautiful radioactive powder conceals a deadly after-effect, the admirable principles of global ecological balance (as practiced in *Waslala*) hide the slow violence against humans. The related tension between utopia and realism is mirrored by that of human rights and ecological balance, in which the local actors in Faguas are obligated by outside powers to respond to global needs (for oxygen) at the expense of their own basic necessities (for shelter and a stable government). In the struggle between principles and people, even when the principles themselves are admirable, *Waslala* suggests that people come first.

People versus Principles Part II: Human Rights and the Economy of Ecology

With its focus on social justice and critique of the extractivist practices of the developed world, *Waslala* clearly condemns the imposition of external notions of environmentalism on the local realities of Faguas. Global principles of ecological balance cannot supersede the basic human rights of all citizens. However, at the same time the novel reveals an irresolvable tension between the universal ideals of human rights and ecological considerations. For while the novel strongly criticizes practices of unfettered consumption, it does not question the underlying principle of private property or ownership. Moreover, not only does *Waslala* imply that property comprises a fundamental human right, but it also suggests that possession and ownership are biologically "natural:" property pertains to both economy and ecology. On one hand, the novel acknowledges a global view—the earth's resources are for *everybody*—yet on the other it advocates a local position—the earth's resources can be owned and controlled by *individuals*. Furthermore, the implication that property rights are somehow natural (in an ecological sense) conflates ecology with economy and serves to undermine the novel's broader critique of neoliberal policy. Through its treatment of ecology in terms of economy, Belli's novel highlights the impossibility of attending equally to global planetary concerns and universal human rights.

Considering the right to water within the framework of human rights makes apparent some irresolvable tensions that arise when ecological issues are considered in the context of human rights. As Richard P. Hiskes notes in his analysis of “environmental human rights,” they are at once universal (ignoring national borders) and local (because the effects of policy and protections are felt at the local level) (238). But the very term “environmental human rights” may embody a different sort of paradox, for the pull to consider environmental issues (e.g. opposing resource extractivism) may tug in the opposite direction of human rights (e.g. the fundamental right to consume a natural resource). Hiskes’ claim that environmental human rights rest upon the premise of humans as “*superior in important ways to animals*” presupposes a fundamentally anthropocentric rather than biocentric view as well as a hierarchy between human and nonhuman which may work against a consideration of ecological issues on a planetary scale (242; emphasis added).

The human “right” to a natural resource (such as oxygen, or water) is additionally predicated upon economic concepts of consumption, value, and ownership, which (paradoxically) are both questioned and affirmed in *Waslala*. For example, the novel mounts a scathing critique of conspicuous consumption in the developed world, best seen in the minute descriptions of the discarded items that arrive in garbage containers and are sorted and sold. The pier where the garbage arrives resembles “the beach where modern civilization deposited the spoils of its shipwreck,” and the extensive and detailed description of the mountains of items, ranging from doorframes to washing machines, offers a sense of the vast scale of waste (133). Lengthy sentences listing item after item combine to form an enormous paragraph, creating a sensation of the magnitude of the piles of discarded articles. The workers marvel at the sheer number of items that arrive in perfect working condition, due to consumers’ desire to have the latest products, prompting Melisandra to condemn such excessive waste as “a sin” (136).¹¹

Nevertheless, at the same time the novel appears to uphold the capitalist impulse in which the natural world is comprised of “resources” for human use. The opening line of the novel expresses Melisandra’s disappointment that she can’t “wrap the river around her throat like a stole made of water” and take it with her on her travels, and is followed by a poetic description of the river, “whose tumultuous or docile flow marked the seasons and the passage of time” (13). In her analysis of the novel, Laura Barbas-Rhoden explains how this opening passage highlights the contradictions in the novel at the level of metaphor. On one hand, the poetic description “signals the spiritual value of the river,” while on the other it “posits the natural world as fashion accessory” (*Ecological Imaginations in Latin American Fiction* 155). Notably, Barbas-Rhoden’s reference to the “spiritual value” of the river signals the way in which the language of economy—

¹¹ DeVries similarly notes that Belli uses the “imagery of murder” to describe the waste (43). The terminology of “sin” and “murder” categorizes the exportation of garbage as worthy of both divine and earthly punishment.

conceiving of elements of the nonhuman world in terms of “value”—permeates any consideration of ecology, both in the novel itself and analyses of the work.

This framing of the nonhuman world primarily in terms of resources and value situates *Waslala* within Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s idea of “the common” and historian Jason Moore’s framework of the Capitalocene, both of which posit an intimate connection between economy and ecology. As Hardt and Negri claim in *Commonwealth*, the notion of “the common”—“the air, the water, the fruits of the soil, and all nature’s bounty”—pertains to all humanity and implies a nonhierarchical relationship between human and nonhuman spheres (viii). Their work explores the negative effects of neoliberal economic policies that seek to transform everything from “information, ideas, and even species of animals and plants—into private property” (viii). Private property is seen as the defining characteristic of geopolitical systems that lead to oppression of humanity and exploitation of the nonhuman realms.

Moore notes a similar connection between economy and ecology. Rather than consider the geologic era marked by human influence on global climate as the “Anthropocene,” which treats humans in general as the source of climate change, Moore proposes the term “Capitalocene” as a more accurate representation of the causes of ecological crisis. He explains, “Capitalism is not an economic system; it is not a social system; it is *a way of organizing nature*” for it is predicated upon relations (both human-human and human-nonhuman) that lead to differential use of natural resources and a false distinction between Nature and Society (2). Moore dates the beginning of this new era to the Columbian exchange, when the seeds of modern capitalism arose, and suggests we ask not what capitalism does to nature, but “how nature *works for* capitalism” (12). By calling attention to not simply *the effects* of humans on the nonhuman environment, but *the relationships* between producer and product, Moore effectively fuses notions of economy and ecology, emphasizing the inability to consider one without the other, while at the same time dismantling the idea of the “Anthropos” as an undifferentiated mass of humanity that affects climate change as a group.

Waslala supports a more nuanced consideration of humanity, for it exposes the human costs of differential development, but it also upholds the idea of Nature as a valuable resource. The novel condemns individuals who exploit Faguas for economic gain, such as the gold prospectors, drug traffickers, and Corporation of the Environment who view the natural world in purely economic terms. Yet at the same time the work appears to substitute one type of value (economic) for another (aesthetic or spiritually beneficial), thereby upholding the conceptual model of nature as “valuable.” Examples abound in the text of poetic descriptions of the natural world, where the “greens are greener” (243), or the earth is “virginal” (39). Raphael is constantly amazed by the beauty of the natural world in Faguas, describing one sunset as “the most poetic vision he ever remembered seeing” (76). Meanwhile, the prospector Hermann contrasts the untamed beauty of Faguas with the civilized, organized gardens of Germany. Hermann travels to Faguas in search of an elusive spiritual peace that can only be found in the natural world, noting that

“one only had to go upriver to recover one’s lost perspective and discover anew man’s smallness faced with the exuberance of centuries of greenness” (72). Hermann’s awe at the untamed natural world of Faguas is reflected in his home, which boasts picture windows and a terrace from which to admire “a sea of frothy plants climbing the mountains toward the horizon” (300). Finally, the chapters in the novel that either begin or end with a poetic description of the natural world—birds flying over the water, waves lapping against the bongo, or the soft call of nocturnal animals—underscore the aesthetic value of the nonhuman world.¹²

Nature, in *Waslala*, equals beauty, yet this excessive admiration all conforms to a greater or lesser degree to what Timothy Morton considers a “fetishization” of Nature. In his words, “Putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration” (*Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* 5). Put another way, conceiving of Nature as beautiful or pristine, in need of protection or care, fails to recognize the complexity and messiness of ecology. Although highly critical of human exploitation of natural resources, *Waslala* upholds an image of the nonhuman world in which Nature’s worth and value remains determined by humans.¹³

This concept of natural resources for human use even extends to the utopian community established to escape the world of conspicuous consumption. One of the signature elements of *Waslala* is the “Corridor of Winds,” a valley in which the breezes blow so regularly that the inhabitants use it to quick dry their laundry (54). The community utilizes the nonhuman world for sustenance, creating gardens, orchards, and farms; they also channel the energy of wind, sun and water, by building windmills and diverting the stream. Although the novel criticizes the excessive consumerism of developed nations, it also upholds the fundamental capitalist notion of the nonhuman world as comprised of “resources” for human use. While it could be argued that such usage denotes survival rather than capitalism, the underlying premise of nonhuman resources controlled and consumed by humans aligns exactly with the roots of the capitalist project as outlined by Moore. The cultivation of filina in Timbú and the management of the river plantation owned by Melisandra’s grandparents provide other examples of recourse control that lie outside critique in the novel—in Hardt and Negri’s terms, the novel criticizes the exploitation of “the common wealth” but does not fully affirm “the common.”¹⁴

Finally, the novel’s consideration of property and ownership demonstrates a similar ambiguity. The poets establish *Waslala* as a place where truly communitarian ideals can flourish. Like the original Utopia conceived of by Thomas More, the inhabitants

¹² See for examples the concluding portions of Chapters 9 and 14.

¹³ Part of the problem arises from the difficulty of conceptualizing “Nature.” As Morton argues in *The Ecological Thought*, there is no such thing as “Nature” that exists outside of our rhetorical constructions.

¹⁴ While one could claim that a key difference lies in scale—ownership and control of natural resources does not necessarily lead to overconsumption—the roots of overconsumption lie in the consideration of natural resources as elements that can be owned and managed by and for humans.

seek to eliminate notions of ambition and greed. By cutting themselves off from the rest of the world, the poets hoped to foment true goodness in future generations; their ideal was to create an egalitarian society that could be reproduced. However, they soon discover that the inhabitants of Waslala are unable to have children. Melisandra suggests that “those who populated Waslala to a certain extent had to give up biological reproduction, the most primary, elemental notion of property” (324). In other words, the communitarian model of Waslala is predicated upon giving up something innately natural: the ability to procreate.

This link between property and biological reproduction lends itself to competing interpretations. On one hand, it implies that property and ownership, far from pertaining solely to the capitalist realm, comprise an essential element of a natural process crucial for human survival. Although the poet-founders of Waslala describe the utopian project in natural terms—“planting the seed” of human goodness (323) and hoping the “cell” would “reproduce” (56)—the ground proves infertile, thereby implying that this communal vision is somehow unnatural. Put simply, the novel suggests that the utopian dream of Waslala rests upon an impossible (and unnatural) sacrifice, as the complete renunciation of property leads to human extinction.

By extending the communitarian ideal of Waslala to its logical (if surprising) conclusion, Belli's novel echoes Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's feminist deconstruction of Marx's theory of production and alienation. In her essay “Feminism and Critical Theory,” Spivak notes that the concept of childbirth destabilizes Marxist categories of use- and surplus-value, for a child is not a commodity, produced for consumption or exchange, and theories of production are inadequate to explain biological reproduction (57-61). Melisandra's observation therefore prompts a consideration of the complicated relationship between production and reproduction and highlights the failure of any model that entails a rejection of property. While the capitalist attitude of the Corporation of the Environment and others who see Faguas purely in terms of privately-owned resources or commodities is soundly criticized, the novel implies that a truly communitarian alternative is either unnatural or unsustainable.¹⁵

At the same time, the connection between property and reproduction also questions capitalist notions of productivity and value. As Vandana Shiva argues in *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*, the western masculine model of progress defines production in terms of technology and commodities, and consequently “[n]ature and women working to produce and reproduce life are declared ‘unproductive’” (43). Shiva cautions that a worldview that fails to recognize the central importance of women's life-giving work may ultimately threaten the survival of humanity. In this sense, by foregrounding the lack of reproduction in Waslala, the novel offers an implicit critique of how women's reproductive power “has been rendered invisible” (Shiva, 5), for it makes clear that the ability to procreate (or not) is the key to the utopian space's survival. By

¹⁵ The implied critique also aligns with a reading of *Waslala* as highlighting the failure of the socialist revolutionary project in Nicaragua (see Moyano).

making visible the literal “unproductivity” of Waslala, Belli’s novel therefore exposes the limitations of considering biological reproduction in terms of western masculine economic models.

The novel does not resolve the ambiguity inherent in the pairing of procreation with property; both the communitarian model and the western masculine capitalist vision of production prove literally unsustainable. Nevertheless, through this linkage *Waslala* not only implies that ownership is “natural” but also upholds the fundamental importance of owning property as a basic human right, as enshrined in Article 17 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Alongside the implied critique of Waslala’s communitarian model, examples abound in the novel of the important connection between control of property and human rights. In the first place, the narrative emphasizes the misery associated with Faguans’ fundamental lack of control over their own destinies. The central park of Cineria, for example, abounds with games of chance ranging from roulette and slot machines to marbles and monopoly. As Maclovio explains, “Cinerians have elevated gambling to an art form,” and enumerates the vast array of bets that are placed, everything from guessing the sex of unborn children to “the number of water droplets that fill a glass” or “the mistakes made by a blind woman” (151). The fact that such extreme (and seemingly meaningless) betting occupies the time of so many inhabitants underscores the lack of control Cinerians have over their own lives. With no way to meaningfully shape their existence, there is little difference between making a living or rolling the dice.

In addition to highlighting the daily despair that results from lack of control, the novel also links dignity with control of property—the worth of individuals is measured by their ability to shape their surroundings. For example, local “ecological terrorists” who work to undermine the Corporation of the Environment through illegal logging or burning forest reserves justify their actions with the slogan “We’ll do what we want. *This land is ours*” (110, emphasis added). The attitude that privileges local control also extends to Engracia’s enterprise sorting, repurposing, and selling the garbage that arrives. Her business provides jobs for young men who otherwise would have no options other than working for the Espadas or joining local gangs. By controlling the trade and distribution of the detritus, Engracia demonstrates the dignity that comes from exercising control over one’s own domain. She reflects, “It was her control of garbage as a resource, the dependency she had managed to create over the years, that granted her authority” (205). The respect she commands comes directly from her control over resources. Don Jose’s plantation on the riverbank represents another example of private property that is above criticism, as it is owned and managed by Melisandra’s grandparents, benevolent hacendados who offer refuge to the inhabitants of neighboring villages (47). Although the Espada brothers are roundly criticized for amassing property by absconding with the funds sent to Faguas in exchange for oxygen, citizens such as Engracia or Don José who manage their own property responsibly remain above critique. Ownership and property

are not the problem; rather, overconsumption, mismanagement, and exploitation.¹⁶ *Waslala* condemns a world divided between “haves” and “have nots,” but never questions the right to “have.”

Through its critique of consumption rather than ownership, *Waslala* demonstrates the extensive reach of the organizing principles of neoliberalism, which conceives of the world in terms of control and consumption of resources. Furthermore, the link between biological reproduction and property—the inability to reproduce within the peaceful confines of *Waslala*—suggests that any attempt at isolation is not only impossible but unnatural. Economy and ecology remain intimately connected, revealing an irresolvable tension between the universal human right to property—which considers the nonhuman world in terms of resources—and the concomitant planetary degradation which often results from such an anthropocentric view, ultimately suggesting the impossibility of attending equally to universal principles of human rights and global ecology.

Conclusion: The Paradox of the “Green Stain”

One of the most notable passages in the novel occurs in the initial description of regions such as Faguas that are condemned to a state of perpetual underdevelopment. The narrative offers a brief history of how certain areas in Latin America and Asia gradually lost any sense of their borders and appear on contemporary maps as “green stains without markings, with no indication of cities: isolated regions, cut off from development, civilization, technology; reduced to jungles, forest reserves, serving as lung and garbage dump for the developed world that exploited them only to plunge them afterwards into the realm of the forgotten” (19). The absence of borders reinforces how these nations have lost any type of independent political definition; although no longer official subjects of a colonial power, they remain subjugated to economic forces that organize the world according to control of natural resources. The only value these areas possess is ecological, not political. Through its sharp critique of the terrible human fallout of such differential development, *Waslala* undermines the notion of considering the “Anthropos” of the Anthropocene as an undifferentiated mass. The novel suggests that just as one should be able to distinguish between Faguas and other “oxygen-producing nations,” one should similarly differentiate between groups of humans in terms of their responsibility for (or experience of) planetary ecological crisis. Considering humanity as an undifferentiated mass is akin to drawing maps with large green stains; such a broad, global view ignores important local realities. By highlighting the tension between global planetary crisis and local human rights, *Waslala* demonstrates how for postcolonial

¹⁶ Further evidence of the way in which ownership remains above reproach can be seen in the discussion of the modern products that appear in Engracia’s garbage bazaar. Josué, the manager of the site notes the “high demand” for solar powered washing machines, and Raphael cheerfully notes Melisandra’s interest and that Josué appeared to have made “his first sale of the day” (135). Unequal distribution of goods is critiqued, the ownership of such goods is not. As Laura Barbas-Rhoden notes, “In *Waslala*, the benevolently powerful confront those who are malevolently so” (Greening 11).

regions, first world environmentalism smacks of “green imperialism,” and the era marked by human impact on climate is better described as “Capitalocene” than “Anthropocene.” Put simply, when forced to choose between the principles of ecological balance and the needs of people, *Waslala* suggests that people should win.

Nevertheless, just as the “Anthropos” is not an undifferentiated mass of humanity, neither is nonhuman ecology. Interestingly, although *Waslala* critiques the politics of the “green stain”—erasing borders robs Faguas of human agency—it does not address the ecological implications of considering the region as an undifferentiated mass of oxygen-producing forest. The novel places both the universal and local contexts of human rights in dialogue with global ecological considerations—the individual rights of Faguans to control their surroundings, firmly rooted in the universal human right to property, trump any global ecological concerns. At the same time, the narrative exhibits a notable absence of any meaningful treatment of local ecology, which has not gone unnoticed by critics. Both Barbas-Rhoden and Steven F. White comment on the “shallow” treatment of ecology in *Waslala*. While Barbas-Rhoden acknowledges that both “deep” and “shallow” positions have merit in Latin American letters, White is less forgiving in his assessment of the novel, claiming that Belli “loses the possibility of creating convincing ecological texts” due to her facile treatment of the natural world as background or decoration. (98, translation is my own). A discussion of the relative merits of deep versus shallow ecological approaches lies outside the scope of this article; however, it is important to note that by eliminating any meaningful treatment of flora or fauna endemic to Nicaragua/Faguas, *Waslala* fails to distinguish Faguas from its neighbors in ecological terms, thereby reproducing the rhetoric of the region as a “green stain” and in a certain sense upholding the destructive human attitudes toward the nonhuman world it aims to critique. *Waslala* highlights the problematic consequences of considering the world in terms of undifferentiated humanity, but not in terms of undifferentiated nonhuman ecology.

In the final analysis, the decidedly anthropocentric vision presented in *Waslala* highlights the many tensions that arise when considering human rights and ecology. The double-pull of global ecological considerations versus local human rights is mirrored by a similar conflict between universals: the ideals of planetary ecological balance versus the foundations of human rights, which appear to move in opposite directions. Global principles of ecological balance that do not distinguish between the human and nonhuman spheres are fundamentally opposed to the naturally anthropocentric foundation of human rights. The novel critiques the practices of unsustainability (overconsumption), rather than the principles underpinning ecological degradation (property and ownership), thereby revealing how one of the fundamental principles of human rights is implicated in planetary ecological crisis and demonstrating the impossibility of escaping the organizing principles of neoliberalism. Although *Waslala* aims to focus on the human costs of global environmental considerations, outwardly privileging human rights over ecological concerns, ultimately it demonstrates both the fundamental interconnectedness of the human and nonhuman spheres and the opposing

pull between the biocentric view of planetary ecology and the anthropocentric position of human rights. The novel itself offers no escape from these fundamental paradoxes—its “solution” of “good capitalism” does nothing to resolve the central tensions—leaving the reader to draw the inevitable conclusion that just as attention to human rights impacts global ecology, planetary ecological crisis will reshape the meaning, practice, and role of human rights.

Submission received 9 August 2019

Revised version accepted 19 March 2020

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