

Garbage Out: Space, Place, and Neo-imperial Anti-development in Gioconda Belli's *Waslala*

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The specter of ecological catastrophe has spawned a myriad of films, philosophies, and literary texts from silly cinematic potboilers like Roland Emmerich's *The Day after Tomorrow* (2004) to serious works of eco-philosophy like Val Plumwood's *Environmental Culture*. In the first part of chapter 3, Plumwood imagines a "rationalist utopia, the EcoRepublic" (62) that features a terrifyingly autocratic police force called EcoGuardians tasked with "coordinating across world society to deal with the massive ecological problems a global capitalist economy has fathered on an injured and captive nature" (62). The economies of power envisioned by Plumwood for the EcoRepublic are almost exactly identical to those in Nicaraguan author Gioconda Belli's *Waslala* (1996). Her novel is set in the fictional Central American republic of Faguas in a future where the oxygen-producing capacity of the land and water of wealthy but overly-industrialized nations has been dangerously depleted. Like the EcoRepublic, *Waslala* also features a powerful ecological police force that implements treaties signed between corrupt governmental officials and the Corporation of the Environment, treaties that provide electricity and other products in exchange for laws that require the absolute conservation of Faguas's jungles; the trees and vegetation of the Central American *selva* ("jungles" or "rainforests") have by now become the sole source of breathable air for the oxygen-deprived Northern nations. Plumwood's EcoRepublic comes from a philosophical monograph on ecological rationalism while Belli's work is a Spanish American novel in the tradition of science fiction. Despite their formal differences, each one is an account of the global impact of poor environmental stewardship and a consideration of the way in which certain discourses of environmentalism can fail to account for the effects of globalized conservationism on local communities. In the rest of this article, I will argue that *Waslala* articulates a place-based political ecology that rejects globalized, spatializing conservationist policies and favors limiting consumption as a solution to current and future environmental crises.¹

The concepts of place and space in geography, anthropology, sociology, literary studies, cultural studies, and other academic disciplines have been given

¹ In *Liberation Ecologies: Environment, Development, Social Movements* (London: Routledge, 1996), Richard Peet and Michael Watts devote extensive space to the definition and analysis of "political ecology." For the purposes of this paper, I have distilled their work to the following definition: the concept can be defined as an analysis (approaching advocacy) of the way in which certain communities negotiate access to natural resources and interactions with the environment.

extensive recent scholarly attention.² For my purposes in this analysis, however, the most succinct and effective definition of the terms comes from Alexandra Kogl's *Strange Places*: "space + meaning = place" (15). This elegantly concise equation frames the debate in general terms, but its mathematical precision is particularly useful here because its inverse, "Space = place - meaning," effectively expresses the central criticism of Belli's novel. *Waslala's* vision of the future for the Third World features a world dominated by technology and ecological exploitation extrapolated by a factor of one hundred years, a time of ecological decline for the industrialized world as underdeveloped countries like Faguas are targeted for their ability to produce clean air.³ Derisively labeled "oxygen-producing nations" (Belli 154), these countries are obliged by the North to preserve their *selvas* in exchange for products from the First World.⁴ The way in which the history of the Faguas jungle along with the identity of its people are erased in the name of globalized conservationism provides a frightening literary vision of a ruthless political ecology summarized by the converse of Kogl's formula mentioned above: "space = place - meaning."

With this political and ecological instability as a backdrop, the novel depicts the violent solution to a conflict between a group of inhabitants of Faguas and the Espada brothers, drug traffickers who use a garbage processing industry that imports trash from the First World as a cover for their network of distribution. The trash importation business is run by Engracia, her lover Morris, and a group of orphaned boys they employ to help sort and reclaim items of value that arrive in the containers of garbage. Proceeds from the sale of whatever can be recovered provide enough income for Engracia and her crew to survive, even profit. But when they find a discarded receptacle of cesium-137 and are exposed to a lethal dose of the radioactive material, they are given less than a week to live. As their last act, Engracia and her boys strap dynamite to themselves, invade the Espada compound, and blow themselves up effectively ending the brothers' murderous grip over the tiny country. The ecological violence of Faguas also serves to frame the story of the orphaned Melisandra and her journalist lover Raphael who embark upon a search for the mythical, utopian land of Waslala that her parents helped found. With the destruction of the Espada brothers, they are finally able to reach it.

² Tim Cresswell's *Place: A Short Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004) is a good place to start. Also, see work by Val Plumwood and Alexandra Kogl plus feminist perspectives in Doreen Massey's *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1994); the view from Spanish America in Arturo Escobar; and Ursula K. Heise on expanding the geographic borders of place.

³ These categories, North/South, First World/Third World, represent a problematic dialectic. I use them because they are the categories used by Belli in *Waslala*; by way of definition and according to their usage in the novel, the North represents wealthier, economically and industrially developed countries that typically lie north of the 30th parallel in the northern hemisphere (with Australia and New Zealand as notable exceptions). These are the countries of the First World that use their influence to dictate the economic policies that deal with the production and export of raw materials in underdeveloped, Third World, Southern countries.

⁴ Translations of quotations from the Spanish are mine.

Belli employs the conventions of science fiction to invent a reality that fits neatly with her criticism of current environmental and economic policies; in the novel, “environmentalist corporations” impose a corporate ecological ethic that benefits residents of the First World through the enforced non-development of the Third:

[. . .] the development of Faguas began to devolve and the country began its return to the Middle Ages, losing its identity as a nation and becoming a simple geographic mass on the map like the *selvas* of the Amazon region were before and vast regions of Africa, Asia, South America, and the Caribbean are now: green stains without characteristics, without any indication of cities: isolated regions, cut off from development, from civilization, from technology; reduced to jungle and forest reserves, only good for making breathable air. (23)

The way in which Faguas is described as a green stain and a nation without an identity, exemplifies the formula “space = place – meaning.” Local nuance has been forcibly stripped from place in Faguas, the region becomes a perfect abstraction—color without characteristic: all of this in the service of what might be a noble goal—the creation of forest and jungle reserves—justified by the conversion of place into space through the use of the reductionist discourse of maps and economic strategies of isolation. The novel is a fine literary example of the underside of what Lawrence Buell (and other ecocritics) describe as translocality: “the increasing sense that regions remain permeable to shock waves potentially extending worldwide. That is why the bioregional horizon must extend beyond a merely local horizon: the locale cannot shut itself off from translocal forces even if it wanted to” (*Future* 88). In *Waslala*, the shock waves come in the form of something that I will characterize below as “neo-imperial anti-development.” However before an inquiry concerning the critique that is at the heart of the novel, some comments about *Waslala*’s literary and cultural context are in order.

In the 1970’s, Gioconda Belli was actively involved in the revolutionary Sandinista resistance to the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua and, after the triumph of the revolution, “lent her considerable talents to the ideological front” (Randall 9). Under Somoza, Nicaragua had one of the worst environmental records in all of the Americas with wide-spread state-supported deforestation and exportation of endangered animal species, extensive water contamination, and a dictator who “raped nature for financial and political gains, and eagerly sold the same opportunity to foreign companies” (Miller 208).⁵ When the Sandinistas came to power, the government adopted a starkly different set of environmental policies including prohibitions against the import of dangerous pesticides and against the export of endangered animals, the creation of conservationist policies accompanied by the development of alternative energies, the development of sustainable biofuels, and the creation of the Nicaraguan Institute of Natural

⁵ See Miller for an extended discussion of environmental issues in recent Nicaraguan history.

Resources and the Environment. However, revolutionary policies for the exploitation of natural resources were not without their own problems:

The Sandinistas, in order to maintain political support distributed large tracts of unused national land to peasants who converted forests into farms. They also continued to bolster a number of now nationalized industries that were notorious polluters as to abandon them would have slowed national development. (Miller 209)

The creation of Faguas in the novel as a surrogate for the environmental issues in Nicaragua likely had as much to do with the novel's status as science fiction as with some regret on Belli's part for some of the ecological failures of the Sandinista regime. However, displacing the narrative of *Waslala* from the immediate political context of late twentieth century Nicaragua has lent the novel considerable vitality: much of the conflict at the heart of the story has only become more relevant in the 15 years since its publication. The Sandinistas were voted out of power in 1990, but the political ecology of environmental crises, the ecological implications of garbage importation, the dynamics of power in space/place conflicts, and other similar issues remain relevant to the political dynamics of current cultural and environmentalist discourse.

Space, Place, and Environmental Justice

I concluded the last section with reference to “the dynamics of power in space/place conflicts”; my use of the word “conflicts” foregrounds the contested status of place and space in academic, literary, social, political, and other contexts. With regard to several scenarios in *Waslala*, I have mentioned that the formula “space = place – meaning” effectively summarizes the issues that are at hand. I now turn to a discussion of some of the more recent ideas concerning the terms place/space/global/local anticipated by and contested in Belli's novel.

As the recent environmental disaster of the Deepwater Horizon/British Petroleum drilling rig in the Gulf of Mexico so calamitously illustrates, ecological issues often have global implications. With the massive volume of oil that spilled into the gulf lurking below the surface and the powerful currents of the Atlantic threatening to pull the contaminated water throughout that ocean's reaches, the catastrophe has the power to affect life quite remote from the site of the original accident. The oil spill is a dramatic, almost apocalyptic illustration of the notion of interconnectedness, a notion that has led some to advocate the extension of ideas of place to include the whole planet. Ursula K. Heise argues for the global nature of the environmentalist perspective:

In a context of rapidly increasing connections around the globe, what is crucial for ecological awareness and environmental ethics is arguably not so much a sense of place as a sense of planet—a sense of how political, economic, technological, social, cultural, and ecological networks shape daily routines. (55)

Elsewhere, Lawrence Buell coined the term “eco-globalist affect” for “an emotion-laden preoccupation with a finite, near-at-hand physical environment, defined, at least in part, by an imagined inextricable linkage between that specific site and a context of planetary reach” (“Ecoglobalist” 232). The extension of place to the planetary scale, at least in the sense of networks and linkages, seems a logical and inevitable step for environmentalist thinking, particularly given the global scale of environmental catastrophes such as the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. In *Waslala*, these linkages are represented by the garbage importation scheme and by the link between the lack of oxygen in Northern countries and the forced conservation in underdeveloped nations to mediate the lack. The novel employs the discourse of environmental justice to highlight the ecological and economic exploitation of poor countries. But the articulation of the narrative from the perspective of the aggrieved has had longstanding precedent in Spanish American literature in such genres as *indigenismo* (texts that endeavor to mount a defense of the rights of indigenous peoples in Latin America), testimonial literature, the fiction of the Mexican Revolution, and certain other regional novels. Despite the rather long history of these literary traditions in Spanish America, environmental analysis of discourse from such perspectives has only recently been categorized as a “Third Wave” of ecocriticism.

Lawrence Buell was the first to classify ecocriticism chronologically using the “wave” metaphor; Scott Slovic and Joni Adamson summarize Buell’s characterization of “First wave environmental criticism” as an analysis that “concerns itself with conventional nature writing and conservation-oriented environmentalism, which traces its origins to the work of Emerson, Muir, and Thoreau”. In his book, Buell distinguishes between “first” and “second wave” ecocriticism by expanding the first wave’s “traditional commitment to the nature protection ethic [...] to accommodate the claims of environmental justice” (*Future* 22). For Slovic and Adamson, this was an important turn in ecocriticism, but one that may have been limited by a “community of ecocritics [that] has been relatively non-diverse and also has been constrained by a perhaps overly narrow construing of ‘white’ and ‘nonwhite’ as the primary categories of ethnicity” (6). As a response to this limitation in the ecocritical community, Slovic and Adamson edited a special issue of *MELUS* (the journal of The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States) containing a collection of essays from a diversity of writers, not constrained by simplistic ethnic categories. The result, as they write in the introduction to the issue, is: “[...] what seems to be a new *third* wave of ecocriticism, which recognizes ethnic and national particularities and yet transcends ethnic and national boundaries; this third wave explores all facets of human experience from an environmental viewpoint” (6-7). Belli’s *Waslala* transcends these boundaries in at least two ways. The invention of Faguas as a fictional but clearly Central American country recognizes ethnic and cultural

particularities while erasing the national boundaries of current geographies. And the novel's use of the conventions of science fiction facilitates a kind of rhetorical distance that allows for pointed criticism of attempts by the First World to mediate its own ecological crisis through the forceful imposition of a non-local political ecology on Central American communities.

Third wave ecocriticism may take many forms. In her own article, Adamson affirms that it "must continue to pay careful attention to the potential of the local, regional, and national to shelter individuals, groups, and ecosystems from injustice" (12). Thus, an analysis of the representation of Faguas in *Waslala* from a third wave perspective might comprise an exploration of the issue of ecological injustice that foregrounds the experiences of casualties of neo-imperial, First World/Third World economy. Faguas acts as an oxygen-producing country and repository of trash for the First World in a relationship of dependency similar to the real set of power relations between the First World and Third World today. *Waslala* illustrates how present distributions of power can have even more dire consequences when extrapolated some fifty or one hundred years in the future. Engracia's garbage enterprise functions as a literary accusation against the excesses of the First World as when Melisandra condemns the ever-present lust for the new and the refuse that such desires generate: "how could anyone not think that all that garbage, all that accumulation of junk, was like the footprints left behind by an assassin" (149). By invoking the imagery of murder, she is forceful in her indictment of the First World for the ecological damage that its excessive production of trash implies as well as for the danger it poses to those who are exposed to it.

The practice of sending garbage from wealthy regions to impoverished nations is widely-practiced today and its adverse consequences are dramatically represented in the novel by the poisoning of Engracia and her crew through exposure to Cesium-137. The fictional incident is all the more distressing in light of the fact that the episode is based on actual events in Goiania, Brazil in September 1987 (Belli 329). Such incidents are common and persistent as evidenced by stories that appear periodically in U.S. newspapers which detail the dangers for Third World laborers who harvest precious metals from imported, discarded computer hardware and other products sent to their countries for disposal.⁶ Faguas, like many Third World countries in the present, exists as an exploited land in a future where decayed social and political conditions allow for the ecological perversion of justice inherent in the power exercised by foreign entities over local ecologies.

Incidents like the Cesium-137 poisoning, fictionalized in *Waslala* but

⁶ See the front page of the "Money" section of the 30 December 2008 edition of *USA Today*; the article by Jeff St. John in the 27 September 2006 edition of the *Fresno Bee*; and the 25 February 2002 editions of the *San Jose Mercury News* (Julie Sevrens), the *Seattle Times* (Kyung M. Song), and the *Bergen Record* (Brian Bergstein).

common enough in the real world, have occasioned thinking about the environment as a global place. Plumwood's critique of remoteness—the separation between consumption and its consequences—is particularly relevant here:

A remoteness principle of ecological rationality is that, other things being equal, an ecologically rational form of agency would minimize the remoteness of agents from the ecological consequences of their decisions (actions). The principle aims to provide agents with the maximum motivation to reach responsible ecological decisions, to correct bad ecological decision, and to minimise the possibilities for ecojustice violations which systematically redistribute rather than eliminate adverse ecological consequences. (72)

The reduction of remoteness as advocated by Plumwood comprises the ethical position in *Waslala* as well; the novel dramatizes the exportation of garbage and its removal from places of power to places of powerlessness, an imbalance that outrages the conscience; for readers, the strong cathartic effect of having literary characters exposed to toxins because of irresponsible ecological behavior produce strong reactions against such irresponsibility and may prod readers to react against similar ecologically bad behavior in the real world. But the novel is much more subtle when it comes to difficulties with apparently responsible ecological behavior, which nonetheless produce undesirable results. The potential downside of the globalization of place in *Waslala* through the imposition of non-local conservationist models represents something that I will characterize in the next section as “neo-imperial anti-development.”

Environmental Neo-imperialist Anti-development

Belli's pessimistic version of the future for the Third World, a future where conflict is epidemic and ever more polarized, rests on her vision of an enforced program of "anti-development." In the novel, the industries of Faguas are reduced to two: "the conservation of its natural resources and the importation of garbage" (159). In *Waslala*, the governments of the First World refuse to continue to mitigate in regional conflicts and are replaced by multinational corporations; breathable air is scarce and becomes a commodity to be valued and exploited. The "Corporation of the Environment" (106) is organized to "protect" and profit from oxygen-producing jungles. Mapped as a "simple geographic mass," the country of Faguas is fetishized because of its trees and oxygen; like many actual Third World communities, it has "been disempowered and marginalized, especially as economic communities, first by centralising processes of nation state formation, and subsequently by globalization" (Plumwood 75). In the novel, the globalization of oxygen reduces Faguas to its capacity to produce oxygen and facilitates an erroneous perception of its interior as a vast and empty natural space, devoid of human inhabitants and undisturbed by human culture. These images undergird a

discourse of "anti-development" where conservation trumps all including the necessities of local populations. The image of Faguas as a pristine, wholly natural wilderness hides the true forces at play in the enforcement of its status as oxygen-producer: the sacrifice of local identities for the bottom-line of the profit-hungry "Corporation of the Environment." In Faguas, the conservation of forests, *selva*, and other oxygen-producing landscape was "the *sine qua non* that ensured that electricity and other goods from the First World would continue to arrive in the country" (120). A positive goal like the conservation of nature becomes an imposed burden enforced by the "Environmental Police." Conservation is not pursued out of concern for the environment but as the obligation in a kind of ecological blackmail, and this economic inequality makes the relationship between the First World and Faguas a form of neo-imperial exploitation.

In the nineteenth century, imperialism as a concept was thought of as the physical invasion by one country into the territory of another for the purposes of annexation; the Napoleonic and U.S./Mexico Wars are examples. But neo-imperialism is characterized less by explicit military invasion and more by the notion of influence and intervention; it seeks to annex the power of control over foreign nations through a variety of military, corporate, political, and economic means. In the novel, conservationism is a form of neo-imperial intervention in that the government and residents of Faguas must comply with First World mandates as the only way to secure electricity and other goods. Concern for the preservation of nature had never been a factor in the economic development of the First World, but now a limited oxygen supply demands extensive conservation and economic disparity dictates the retardation of development for the Third World. The forests of Faguas are set aside for conservation, not because of any immediate environmental threat to the forests themselves, but due to the degradation of non-local ecologies: in the North, nature has been rendered incapable of producing enough oxygen for its own populations because of incessant over-development. Conservation in the context of a global economy of unequal power, demand, and consumption becomes a function of the commodification of Nature and not a product of concern for the future of humankind. This conflict, the clash between the seemingly benign environmentalist pursuit of conservation versus the neo-imperial imposition of that political ecology, represents another line of inquiry for ecocritics. As Scott Slavic has pointed out, third wave ecocriticism features an analysis where "global concepts of place are being explored in fruitful tension with neo-bioregionalist attachments to specific locales" (7). The conflict that is at the heart of *Waslala* resides exactly in the tension of the intersection between the "global concepts of" and local attachments to a specific place. In the novel, the imposition of anti-development in Faguas proceeds from non-local, but economically powerful entities with designs on targeted, resource-producing regions. The fact that in Belli's novel oxygen is a resource which is exploited through anti-development "documents an important tension that arises in the

environmental struggles of the developing world, that is, what some see as a privileging of ecological concerns over the plight of people” (Barbas Rhoden “Greening” 14). In this way, *Waslala* envisions the danger that a global concept of place can imply for local communities.

The representation of the baleful effects of forced conservationism and the subsequent imposition of spatialization through the denial of meanings assigned by distinct communities in local place-making is at the heart of *Waslala*’s criticism of political ecologies that rest upon the draconian formula “Space = place – meaning.” I do not intend to denigrate the seriousness of the conflict set up here, because there are legitimate concerns on both sides of the issue. As Ursula K. Heise observes:

periodic media coverage of the dire necessity that drives the poorest populations, especially of Brazil, to clear rainforest for agricultural use in spite of its long-term unsuitability for such purposes presents First World environmentalists with difficult choices between the urgency of alleviating extreme human misery, at least temporarily, and the need to preserve one of the most ecologically rich and irreplaceable natural systems on the planet. (91)

However, the tendency to spatialize local places by reducing them to “a geographic mass” or “green stain on the map” or to subsume a sense of place by a sense of planet may ignore the principle of “affectedness” which Patrick Murphy characterizes as a requirement for political decision-making: “all of those entities, human and nonhuman, affected by political and economic decisions made by human communities need to be taken into account before policies are implemented” (44). Besides the obvious moral and ethical issues raised by Murphy, ignoring this principle also risks overlooking local and environmentally sound articulations of nature.

Colombian geographer and anthropologist Arturo Escobar has worked extensively on the issues surrounding development and globalization and their links to conceptions of place and space. He is particularly sensitive to the ways in which local communities can articulate their own views of nature:

Perhaps the most well-established notion today is that many local models do not rely on a nature-society dichotomy. In addition, and unlike modern constructions with their strict separation between biophysical, human and supernatural worlds, it is commonly appreciated that local models in non-Western contexts are seen as often predicated on links of continuity between the three spheres. (151)

This emphasis on the continuity between nature, humanity, and spirituality implies that the practice of such beliefs entails conceptions of place that necessarily involve all three. In *Waslala*, conservationism is imposed through threat of economic warfare and enforced by environmental police; local models for maintaining biodiversity are ignored. Belli’s novel condemns the folly of such approaches by including an ecologically valid, alternate sense of magical, spiritual

place in the form of the mythical land of Waslala itself. Rather than a program of neo-imperial anti-development, *Waslala* features a utopian community accessible only through a fictionalized conceit (the classic sci-fi rift in space/time), but proffering a model of community, small-scale development, and harmony with nature as its most important values.

The Waslala Ideal

To accept utopian possibilities requires a suspension of disbelief. By situating the narrative within the parameters of science fiction, the novel invites readers' belief in a fictional world where mythical places like Waslala do indeed exist, places where "love, cooperation, and the common good were the pillars of a happiness [. . .] never before known" (278). The element of the fantastical prepares the reader to approach an idea like Waslala not for its plausibility as a real destination but as fictional inspiration for a spiritually-based sense of place founded upon ecological ideals. Here, the path to ecological purity was revealed in a dream come to one of the poet-founders about an area of great natural beauty, "a place favored by nature" (61). The idea of an ideal ecological community for the purposes of actual ethical projects like environmentalism or political ecology seems to be of little practical use: a population of six billion arranged in countless political and social units and the infrequent or nonexistent status of the fantastic makes such a vision impractical. And even within the novel itself, problems with a place like Waslala are evident; one of the community's founders reflects that the intolerable chaos that would result from opening Waslala to the masses demonstrates the impossibility that the community could exist on a large scale:

In those days, I began to ask myself whether the cell would one day be able to reproduce or if we ran the risk of cutting ourselves off from the outside world to the point that we had begun to repel any and all external influences, becoming a kind of modern day Avalon, a bewitched island unreachable by the common person, an impregnable fortress. (63)

Except for the small community that could fit within its confines and find and pass through the time-space rift, the very nature of a place like Waslala demands that the rest of the world be excluded. The resource requirements, moral turpitude, and sheer quantity of humans automatically disqualify Waslala as a catholic model for humanity.

So the poet-founders decide to approach their experiment from a different angle, an angle that does not necessitate the opening of Waslala to the masses, but that also does not compromise the ideal of societal reformation proposed in the act of its founding. The plan was to allow rumors of Waslala to filter throughout Faguas in the hope that the very idea of such a place would improve the world outside:

Waslala was no longer the tentative experiment that we had constructed. It was a

legend, a point of reference, a hope. Even before its efficacy could be proven, it had become a paradigm. It carried out the function of a dream, capable of mobilizing the desires and aspirations of those who desired a collective destiny more in line with the highest human potential. We understood that the fantasy had acquired as much validity as reality. (316-317)

The founders believed that the abstract ideal of Waslala--the spiritual belief in the importance of the common good and in the possibility of an ideal future society--could function to inspire behavior outside of the place itself.

The poet-founders intended that residents of Faguas should think of Waslala as "a dream, capable of mobilizing desires and aspirations." This moment invites readers to consider the novel in exactly the same way. Certainly, the failure of Utopian projects across the ages provides real evidence that such schemes rarely work out. However, as political theorist George Kateb observes:

Although the utopian writer may do nothing to improve society, he may still deem it worthwhile to preserve the concept of the ideal. [. . .] to insist on the distinction between the acceptable and the ideal can have a chastening influence on those who govern as well as on those who happily go along. (214)

The ideals of Waslala are a potentiality for the fictional country of Faguas in the same way that the ideals of *Waslala* are a potentiality for actual communities, countries, and regions outside the realm of fictional worlds. That is, the conception of an idealized place like Waslala invites a consideration of what Escobar calls the "politics of the defense of place:" "Theoretically, it is important to learn to see place-based cultural, ecological, and economic practices as important sources of alternative visions and strategies for reconstructing local and regional worlds, no matter how produced by 'the global' they might also be" (165-66). *Waslala* can be seen as a fable whose moral lesson constitutes a "defense of place." In the fictional world of the novel, Waslala eventually emerges not as a real, viable alternative to the violence, neo-imperialism, and anti-development suffered by Faguas. Rather, it serves as a paradigm and point of reference for the creation of a communal, place-based strategy for "reconstructing local and regional worlds."

The limitations of utopian paradigms are well known, but this does not necessarily limit the persuasive force of utopian rhetoric. Lawrence Buell recommends "the treatment of rhetoric as environmental representation in a spirit of skepticism toward rhetoric's propensity for distortion and overreach, yet receptivity to its potentialities: descriptive and visionary as well as polemical" (Buell *Future* 46). We have good reason to be suspicious of utopian schemes for real-world solutions, yet Belli's novel succeeds not for the viability of its paradigm, but because its rhetoric advises against placing too much trust in globalized visions of place for the danger that such notions pose when they deign to obliterate local conceptions of place. *Waslala* espouses the ideal of "a collective destiny more in line with the highest human potential," but it rejects the calculus of power inherent

in a neo-imperialistic extortion that seeks to eliminate the ability of local populations to assign meaning to their environments. This tendency in *Waslala* is typical of what third wave ecocriticism has emphasized, namely that multiethnic literature is particularly well-suited to accomplish a more just sense of place.

Although he does not use the explicit language of “third wave ecocriticism,” Patrick Murphy’s work in *Ecocritical Explorations in Literary and Cultural Studies* qualifies as such. It affirms that Asian, American indigenous, ecofeminist, and other similar literary forms represent states of affairs where “most of the environmental responses to the limitations of the nation/state and TNC’s [transnational corporations] have come not at the transnational level but at subnational/substate, regional, and local levels” (40). The rhetorical appeal of a utopian refuge protected by a rift in space/time in the context of the neo-imperialism of anti-development resides precisely in the fact that an idealization of the perfect small-scale, local community—the “Waslala” of the poet-founders—is such a devastating critique of globalized nation/state political arrangements and the nefarious power of transnational corporations. And although it may hit a little too close to the mark for some, Belli also exposes the sobering potential for conservationist environmentalism in our own world to mimic the power structures of “neo-imperialist anti-development” by having economically powerful entities forcibly impose a foreign political ecology on a hapless fictional country.

In the end, *Waslala* provides an ideal object of analysis for third wave ecocritics with its prioritization of a Central American perspective at the intersection of local and global conceptions of place and space and its advocacy of utopian ideals as a point of reference for the organization of society and for political ecology. It complements ideas like Lawrence Buell’s “ecoglobalist affect,” dramatizes the effects that makes Val Plumwood’s notion of the importance of reducing remoteness so urgent, and affirms Escobar’s advocacy for a “politics of the defense of place.” As a novel, its style differs markedly from the sober prose of the monograph, treatise, or essay, but reminds us of the importance of literary texts for the inclusion of perspectives sought by “third wave ecocritics”, perspectives that originate in places like Central and South America: in the South and from the Third World.

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