

Giulia Champion
University of Warwick, UK
g.champion@warwick.ac.uk

Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, *Allegories of the Anthropocene* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2019), 280pp.

DOI: [HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.37536/ECOZONA.2020.11.1.3625](https://doi.org/10.37536/ECOZONA.2020.11.1.3625)



Elizabeth DeLoughrey's *Allegories of the Anthropocene* inscribes itself in a scholarly tradition seeking to redress discussions on anthropogenic climate change—and its cultural and artistic representation—by redefining them through their colonial and neo-imperial entanglements. This book does this by engaging with postcolonial and Indigenous perspectives, which are often neglected, if not completely erased, in the discourse. Hence, the book is part of a broader project in the environmental humanities aiming to rehumanise and decolonise geology, which has been engaging with the pitfalls of the term “Anthropocene”. Many authors have engaged with these limitations, raising them in relation to the multiple erasures the term implicates, given its homogenisation of the global population and the implication of uniform environmental impact, to its obliteration of violent histories of dispossession and oppression.

By decolonising geological discourse, as well as scholarship about climate change more broadly, *Allegories of the Anthropocene* challenges climate change epistemologies and realities to illuminate the continued, violent atmospheric changes confronting spaces formerly colonised as the consequence of their imperial and military repression and exploitation. The specific focus is on works produced by artists from different islands in the Atlantic and the Pacific. These are chosen because of the special importance given to (geographical) insularity, not only in Western colonial discourse—as DeLoughrey notes in considering *Robinson Crusoe*—but also in a contemporary climate change discourse infused by sensationalism and what DeLoughrey terms “salvage environmentalism” (170). Indeed, by inscribing itself in a history of white saviour rhetoric, contemporary discourse in the Global North of climate crisis often fetishizes and reifies islands and their populations; they are victims to be saved from rising tides with the sole purpose of preserving Edenic vacation destinations. Such understandings of insular spaces continue to perpetuate western colonial rhetoric and practices. Hence the importance of this timely study, which elevates and engages with, in various ways, island artists’ own definitions of their identities and their relations to the environment. And, crucially, it does so through postcolonial, indigenous and feminists’ epistemologies.

As DeLoughrey argues, these artists’ works offer “counterallegories” to western conceptualisations of the tropical island, challenging these figurations suffused with colonial rhetoric. Each chapter of the book considers what should be seen as obsolete colonial allegories of these spaces and provides new ones conceptualised by postcolonial artists. The first chapter, “Gendering Earth”, investigates Erna Bordber’s novel *The*

Rainmaker's Mistake (2007). It explores its excavation of lost Caribbean history and of the dissolved relation people have with the Earth and soil under the imperial violence of plantation agriculture. Chapter two, "Planetarity", engages with radiation imperialism and solar ecologies by considering allegories of light and apocalyptic imageries in the works of Māori writers Hone Tuwhare and James George and the Tahitian author Chantal Spitz. It considers how, in these cultural productions, radiation produced through Cold War nuclear fallout permeates both the atmosphere and oppressed indigenous bodies, with a particular focus on James George's *Ocean Roads* (2006) and drawing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of planetarity. Chapter three considers neo-imperial practices in the Caribbean and engages with allegories of waste embodied in technofossils "collected" by artists. It does so by looking at different pieces by Dominican Artist Tony Capellán, including the powerful installation used as the cover image of the book *Mar Caribe* (1995), Kamau Brathwaite's poem "Dream Haiti" (1995) and Orlando Patterson's novel *The Children of Sisyphus* (1964). The chapter challenges the supposed disposability of former colonies and their inhabitants in colonial discourse, which has sought to rationalise the violent practices of exploitation which have exacerbated and precipitated the climate crisis in these spaces.

Chapter four and five shift the focus from the excavation of erased histories in the previous chapters towards considering possible futures where interspecies relations and indigenous feminist ethics of care become central to the relations we have both amongst each other as well as with our endangered world. Thus, chapter four, "Oceanic Futures", represents a shift in the book as a whole. The apparent inverted chronology of the works investigated in the first three chapters culminates on what DeLoughrey has previously theorised as "critical ocean studies", which is crucial in the conceptualisation of historicity and time in *Allegories of the Anthropocene*. DeLoughrey's work thus formally challenges western historical linearity and does so by engaging with indigenous conceptions of time and history. DeLoughrey's adoption of Kamau Brathwaite's "tidalectics" in conceptualising historicity is significant in that it brings together historicity and the ocean, since they are tightly connected and developed through the environmental kinship of Caribbean authors. "Tidalectics" engages with the ocean as a meaningful space for island artists, not as *aqua nullius*, but rather as a repository of history—famously expressed by Derek Walcott in his poem "The Sea is History"—and as an active part of Atlantic—and by extension Pacific—identities and aesthetics. In light of this, chapter five, "An Island is a World", emphasises again the importance of postcolonial and feminist indigenous ontologies in challenging the dichotomy in western discourse which alienates "human" and "non-human" nature. In doing so, DeLoughrey reaches the conclusion that, for our future, caretaking ethics and improved empathic relations must be forged and practiced. This also engages with an impulse to decolonise ontologies and ethics in addition to geology and discussions around our current climate emergency.