Editorial
Creative Writing and Arts

The Postcolonial Nonhuman

Elizabeth Tavella
University of Chicago
ecozona.arts@gmail.com

DOI: https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozona.2022.13.2.4908

Mni Wiconi. This is the chant that echoed in 2016 on the land of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe in opposition to the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline and as a reminder to the world that *Water Is Life*. As oil began making its way through the pipeline, the so-called United States agreed to remaining locked into a fossil fuel-based economy exacerbating climate change and causing health hazards with consequences for already vulnerable populations, both of and beyond the human. The DAPL is just one of the innumerable environmental injustices that Native peoples have faced, consisting of treaty rights abuses and military-style operations against nonviolent water protectors. Making sense of these events, entails coming to terms with a history of settler colonialism, "an ideology of white supremacy and a policy of genocide and land theft that has included massacres, military occupation, torture, removal from ancestral lands, and the removal of children from their families" (Wiltenburg Todrys 9). At the core of this issue of Ecozon@ devoted to "The Postcolonial Nonhuman" is the acknowledgment that the legacy of this ideology lives on, and that the physical and cultural resistance to its brutality needs to be embraced through a relational framework rooted in multispecies solidarity and mutual support, mindful of nonhuman agency and subjectivity.

It is no coincidence that I begin this editorial with water. Over the last few weeks, a series of water disasters took over the news: more than one third of Pakistan is underwater due to deadly floodwaters, leaving over thirty-three million people displaced; the entire island of Puerto Rico is devastated by a hurricane and left without power or potable water; south-western Japan was battered by Typhoon Nanmadol, one of the worst storms the country has ever seen; in Jackson, Mississippi, a historic flooding damaged a major pump, leaving over one hundred thousand of the city's mostly Black residents without access to clean water; just to name a few. Within this context, turbulent waters become the manifestation of a language of resistance that refuses to submit to extractive and exploitative forces fueled by capitalist culture and to what Farhana Sultana calls "the unbearable heaviness of climate coloniality." However, we must not make the mistake of interpreting the unruliness of water as just a metaphor. In fact, water is in our bodies, water connects us, and water keeps us alive. Water is alive. And just as bodies carry vestiges of trauma, so do bodies of water. From this perspective, water must thus be understood as a bearer of stories, that is, as a collaborator helping to bring afloat the

(hi)stories of multispecies erasure and silencing initiated by colonial violence. The six artists, whose work is included in the Creative Writing and Arts section of this issue, all collaborate with water in various ways to tell stories of ecological destruction and renewal, of intergenerational pain and healing. By "tak[ing] seriously the vitality of nonhuman bodies" (Bennett viii), space is thus created for a radical reimagining of human-nonhuman relationality within the context of a postcolonial world.

The *Serpent River Book* by Carolina Caycedo, which opens the section, represents the perfect realization of this potential. In fact, with this artwork, Caycedo aims to expose the slow violence of extractivism, particularly within the context of the industrialization and privatization of river systems in Colombia, Brazil, and Mexico (Caycedo). As illustrated by the installation view of the book at the 2021 exhibition, *El momento del yagrumo*, in Puerto Rico, the assemblage into an accordion fold artist-book of archival images, maps, lyrics, satellite photos and the artist's own images and texts, is meant to visually simulate the ever-changing shape of a river. By rejecting the static nature of the physical book, and instead creating opportunities for multimodal configurations – either partially or fully unfolded or bringing closer the pleats on the pages to visualize parallel ongoing narratives – the artist animates the unpredictable and nonlinear ways in which rivers flow on the material page. As Cleo Wölfle Hazard keenly reminds us, "rivers inscribe the land with evidence of alternative (hi)stories and hint at latencies that their flows might awaken" (8). By inviting an interactive engagement with the book, viewers are thus offered the ideal conditions to participate in the dynamic unfolding of the temporalities and histories lying in the underflows of the river.

This type of interaction is also encouraged through the cover image, which, thanks to its horizontal orientation intended to disrupt the expected order of fruition, forces us to move, to adapt the direction of our gaze, and to question normative ways of looking, in order to fully grasp its meaning. While the imagery of the Black Snake has notoriously been associated to the pipeline at Standing Rock by the Indigenous peoples in the area, Caycedo is relying on ancestral Amazonian mythology and cosmological iconography that alludes to "the Amazon River as the terrestrial Anaconda and the Milky Way, the supernatural and creative Anaconda" (Navarro 150). The visually inseparable essence of snake and river highlights the overlapping destinies and symbiotic relations that connect all living things: the book becomes the snake that becomes a river that becomes the snake. Just like a living archive, then, the book itself becomes a vessel of knowledge with the power to decolonize imaginaries that destructively frame not only rivers as commodifiable resources but also all those communities across species affected most severely by the ripple effects of colonial violence.

In continuity with the thematic thread of water and, more specifically, of alternative visualizations of postcolonial histories connected to rivers, the second contribution is an excerpt from the volume of poetry *Teardrops on the Weser* by Amatoritsero Ede, an international award-winning Canadian poet born in Nigeria. This book is structured into a series of twenty-six poems whose titles follow the order of the alphabet and that trace, with an epic tone, the poet's stream of consciousness, in addition to memories evoked by his view from an apartment window of the Weser River of Lower

ECOZON@ | Vol 13, No 2

Saxony, Germany. In the selected extract, from *t* to *w*, the "sluggish" German river recalls "the nightmares of the brackish tides" of the Niger River Delta, thus evoking past memories of the poet's native home. Through vivid imagery, he then denounces the pollution brought by the oil company Shell in Nigeria as well as its complicity in the 1995 execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa, leader of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People. Finally, Ede ties the slave trade into the narrative, "that trafficking of black souls / in rotten ship holds / across the cursed atlantic."

As the letters on the page sinuously take the shape of a flowing river, water in this context becomes the vessel of racial and colonial history bursting from the rumbling tides of rivers located in geographically distant—yet deeply linked—places. The lack of punctuation and the consistent use of lowercase letters contribute on a graphic level to enhancing the overall sense of fluidity and continuity meant to resemble not only a body of water but also the entanglement of histories and memories. The "teardrops" in the title, then, composed of salt water and thus reminiscent of the "cursed" sea, represent a bodily trace of the intergenerational trauma caused by colonial violence. Yet, through this powerful poetic act they may become a sign of healing for both the writer and the readers.

While the third contribution continues to navigate the realm of rivers, the poem *Questions* by R. Sreejith Varma takes advantage of the synesthetic qualities of language to enter into dialogue with the nonhuman. This bilingual poet, who writes in English and Malayalam, is also a renowned translator, particularly of *Mayilamma: The Life of a Tribal Eco-Warrior* (translated in collaboration with Swarnalatha Rangarajan in 2018), which chronicles the life of the Adivasi woman who led the Plachimada anti-Coca-Cola campaign in Kerala, India. In the guise then of nonhuman translator, the poet "tr[ies] to translate / the riverspeak / in silence." In this poem, dreamscapes blend with reality and all elements are embedded with personhood, which is invigorated by embracing personal pronouns and personifications: "the earth changes her scent," "the river crawls / on all fours." Consequently, the poet manages to capture the sensory vibrancy that stems from reciprocal conversations with nature. As colors spill into rivers and unanswered questions enliven the ecological dialogue, Varma gets to the core of the question that continues to be at the heart of academic debates concerning nonhuman agency, that is, can the postcolonial subject speak? Yes, it can, and it does.

Within the fourth contribution, the voice of the nonhuman majestically emerges in all its strength. The extraordinary poem *The Raven* is written by Uchechukwu Peter Umezurike, who has a poetry collection forthcoming in 2023 and whose research interests span from African and African Diaspora literatures and creative writing to gender and sexuality. As he writes in the abstract, "this poem presents the raven as a seer who instigates a dialogue with the speaker to contemplate the confluence of human-engineered problems, ranging from ecological plunder, global warming, species die-off, and migrant deaths, amid the enduring legacy of colonial violence." Within the sequence of stanzas characterized by a fluctuating number of lines, a multispecies conversation is enacted, during which the raven takes on multiple roles: that of storyteller, of kin offering premonitory advice, of keeper not only of intergenerational knowledge, but also of the human interlocutor's childhood memories: "the raven cuts me short with a song my

ECOZON@ | Vol 13, No 2

mother used to sing." The poet manages to effectively transcend the humanism that still populates postcolonial discourse (Fayaz Chagani) as well as the institution of speciesism by engaging with the subjectivity of the raven beyond the metaphorical history that has been conferred to them as a species.

As the exchange unfolds, the personal flows into the coral, with images of blackened rivers and bones dispersed in the Atlantic carrying painful traces of "the power of dreams that care nothing of earth." The peculiar merging of temporalities in the poem mirrors the blurring of the individual/collective dichotomy as well as of the human-nonhuman artificial barrier, thus troubling both linear logic and hierarchical structures glorified in western culture. Once again, water tells a story, a submerged History that, as the poet reminds the raven, "shall rise again."

With a similar purpose of exposing alternative histories, the three poems by Manuela Palacios take us on a journey across time of human-whale relationships, offering a poetic historical account of whales and whaling from the perspective of the oppressed: the *Eubalaena,* considered "the right" whales to capture due to their being slow swimmers and more likely to float once killed. The first poem retraces four main stages in Galician whaling activities, serving as a testament of a violent past deeply tied to colonial domination: from "the first Galician / written record of whale / hunting" and Sven Foyn's introduction of the modern harpoon cannon, to the development of industrial capitalism with the launching of the Caneliñas factory and the sinking of two whalers in Vigo, Spain carried out by the militant direct-action organization Sea Shepherd. The second and third poems shift to individual stories of women and whales grounded in ecofeminist principles. In *Hospitable bellies*, the subjectivity of a stranded whale, whose "rotting" body is turned into a spectacle by curious onlookers attracted by her "mother cry," is slowly reduced to "no more than stale film decor" as a result of the colonial gaze. In *Penelopes*, while uncovering whale fossils in Wadi-al Hitan, we encounter a girl who "inspects / the dissection / of her own body as / piece by piece / the whale is dismembered." This visceral trans-species connection rooted in bodily affinity unearths not only stories of cruelty against our marine kin but also histories of enduring systemic injustices that cross the species barrier. While the three poems can stand alone, if read as a triptych, they invoke untamed futures with "no more sailors' tales / of heroic adventure," thus turning the reader into a witness with the ability to refuse to be a bystander and instead to actively contribute to building those desired futures.

With the last contribution, Rosanne van der Voet brings the dialogue full circle by making tangible the intimacy of human and nonhuman matter through the networks of relations that water sustains. In *Living as Water*, the writer adopts a unique multimodal approach that blends creative and academic writing styles and genres. As we follow the tide of the words moving through "watery worlds," "watery thinking," and "watery skin," an exciting journey begins into a possible non-anthropocentric phenomenological experience. By forcing us to think beyond our limited comprehension of consciousness, van der Voet mimics the movements of jellyfishes on the page, thus bringing us closer to not only imagining, but actually sensing what it must feel like to "swim in a watery way," or "to become liquid." What does it mean, then, to live as water? According to the writer,

ECOZON@ | Vol 13, No 2

jellyfishes can teach us. In fact, the poetic re-creation of the flowing character of water embodied by the jellyfish initiates a process of remembrance in the readers who are reminded that they "have always been watery." Relearning this visceral, ecological connection to water, inevitably leads to recognizing that the creatures inhabiting the seas are our relatives, our ancestors, a reality that positions the current degradation of ocean ecosystems into a whole different light.

As Jewett and Garavan point out, "stories are like rivers. They have many beginnings and multiple sources that come together and grow stronger in their telling and then flow outward into the sum of all stories" (43). In a similar spirit, the creative voices included in this issue come together to denounce the epistemic and corporeal violence against the nonhuman through an intersectional and decolonial framework, while also promoting collective healing through art, which includes dismantling entrenched and highly defended western cultural and economic practices. Echoing Juli Berwald's concluding reflections in her book devoted to jellyfishes: "We can protect this stunning planet we all share if we grow a collective spine. And we can" (304).

Works cited

Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke University Press, 2010.

Berwald, Juli. *Spineless: The Science of Jellyfish and the Art of Growing a Backbone*. Riverhead Books, 2017.

Caycedo, Carolina. "Serpent River Book." http://carolinacaycedo.com/serpent-river-book. Accessed 24 September 2022.

Chagani, Fayaz. "Can the Postcolonial Animal Speak?" *Society & Animals*, vol. 24, 2016, pp. 619-637. 10.1163/15685306-12341421.

Jewett, Chas, and Mark Garavan. "Water is Life – an Indigenous Perspective from a Standing Rock Water Protector." *Community Development Journal*, vol. 54, no. 1, 2019, pp. 42-58. https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsy062.

Navarro, Alexandre Guida. "Ecology as Cosmology: Animal Myths in Amazonia." *Ecosystem and Biodiversity of Amazonia*, edited by Heimo Mikkola, IntechOpen, 2020, 147-158. 10.5772/intechopen.94177 .

Sultana, Farhana. "The Unbearable Heaviness of Climate Coloniality." *Political Geography* (March 2022). In press, corrected proof. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2022.102638.

Wiltenburg Todrys, Katherine. *Black Snake: Standing Rock, the Dakota Access Pipeline, and Environmental Justice*. University of Nebraska Press: 2021.

Wölfle Hazard, Cleo. *Underflows: Queer Trans Ecologies and River Justice*. University of Washington Press, 2022.

 ISSN 2171-9594