

The Postcolonial Nonhuman An Introduction

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In her seminal discussion of the term “postcolonial” in *Colonialism-Postcolonialism* (1998), Ania Loomba turns to the Oxford English Dictionary to begin the conversation. She notes that the OED defines colonialism as “a settlement in a new country . . . a body of people who settle in a new locality” (7). Strikingly, she comments, the OED definition “avoids any reference to people other than the colonizers, people who might already have been living in those places where colonies were established,” thus alleviating colonialism of “any implication of an encounter between peoples, or of conquest and domination” (7). Loomba articulates a postcolonial project to correct this injustice. Her definition of “postcolonial” is nuanced and dependent upon context and situation. But it retains the OED’s focus on people, drawing attention to the varied and various human experiences of encounter, conquest, and domination. As such, it is illustrative of the broad focus on people—colonizers, colonized, and the formerly colonized—in postcolonial studies.

The environmental turn in postcolonial studies since the late 1990s has not fundamentally altered the preoccupation with the human. With an emphasis on environmental justice, scholarship on postcolonial ecologies, slow violence, and the afterlives of colonialism has prioritized deleterious environmental consequences for human communities (Mukherjee 2010; DeLoughrey and Handley 2011; Nixon 2011). Inspired by the environmental justice framework, scholars have examined the dispossession of land and inequitable distribution of the commons, interrogated the implications of energy extraction, especially oil, in the postcolony, and unearthed the dumping of toxic waste among other forms of violence inflicted on formerly colonized people (Caminero-Santangelo 2014; James 2015; Wenzel 2020). But humans are not alone in peopling postcolonial environments. There is a growing awareness that environmental harm affects more than humans and that comprehensive accounts of postcolonial contexts must appreciate the interconnection of humans with nonhumans,

questions of nonhuman subjectivity and agency, and how these complex factors play out in cultural texts as “aesthetics of proximity” (Huggan and Tiffin 2010; Iheka 2018).

This attention to more-than-the-human is inspired by indigenous cosmologies from Africa, to the Americas, and Asia that have always considered the nonhuman as “earth beings” characterized by an “animist materialism,” even if colonial thinking dismissed such practices as evidence of primitivity (Garuba 2003; de la Cadena 2010). Furthermore, recent writings on material ecocriticism, attuned to the agency, vitality, and vivacity of matter, have also shaped the nonhuman turn in the study of postcolonial environments (Alaimo 2010; Iovino and Oppermann 2014). Animals have been particularly studied in this new configuration of postcolonial ecocriticism but there is a broader constellation of nonhuman presences and assemblages deserving scrutiny in postcolonial settings (Mwangi 2020; Sinha and Baishya 2020).

In this special issue on “The Postcolonial Nonhuman,” we prioritize the multiplicities of nonhuman actors in postcolonial locales without losing sight of their entanglement with humans and their implications for ecological justice. We see rich potential for this prioritization, including discussions of nonhuman agency and subjectivity, and assemblages of the human and nonhuman, in colonial and postcolonial contexts. We also see a focus on the postcolonial nonhuman as challenging and/or enriching imperial narratives of the colonial nonhuman, which so often focus on charismatic megafauna such as tigers, elephants, condors, and pandas, or the vegetal monocrops of sugar, tobacco, and tea. In our revised project, we foreground the role that non-charismatic microfauna such as insects play in colonial and decolonial histories, as well as postcolonial flora beyond the plantation. Such a project also queries and illuminates the vital role of the nonhuman in decolonizing projects and postcolonial infrastructures, and fosters analysis of multimedia representations of the postcolonial nonhuman.

The six essays in this special issue of *Ecozon@* are rich illustrations of the varied approaches that a focus on the postcolonial nonhuman affords us. In “Subalterns in the House: Sites for a Postcolonial Multispecies Ethnography,” Susan Haris places explicit emphasis on the methodology of the postcolonial nonhuman project. She begins her essay by considering the obstacles to a productive postcolonial multispecies ethnography, most notably the resistance in postcolonial scholarship to focus on nonhuman animal subjects because of the traditional—and often violent—conflation of colonized peoples and animals that dehumanizes the human subject. Yet Haris finds promise in the work of scholars such as Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, and Anna Tsing because of their emphasis on relation, mutuality, and alliances. Using this work as inspiration, she sketches out a postcolonial nonhuman ethnography that does not dehumanize, nor anthropomorphize, in damaging ways via its attention to five aspects common to both postcolonial studies and ethnography: the subaltern, the local, the collective, representation, and decolonization. Haris discusses examples of projects that illustrate all five aspects, providing her readers with concrete examples of a postcolonial multispecies ethnography that “re-dignifies the nonhuman animal subject” by fostering attunement to “the radical possibility of realizing their embodied perspectives”.

Ashwarya Samkaria turns to Amitav Ghosh’s fiction to explore the intersection of the nonhuman and twenty-first-century racial and ecological injustices in India. In “Postcolonial Nonhuman Blurring (B)orders in Migrant Ecologies: A Postanthropocentric Reading of Amitav Ghosh’s *Gun Island*,” she argues that Ghosh’s novel illuminates the agentic capacities of the postcolonial nonhuman subject via its deployment of the generic conventions of folkloric myths, its representations of human-nonhuman intermeshing and cohabitation, and the linguistic polyphony of migrant ecologies that make audible human and nonhuman voices. Above all, she argues that a “postanthropocentric” reading of *Gun Island* offers us “counter-hegemonic strategies to re-situate humans and nonhumans in an interconnected manner”. As the essay’s title suggests, Samkaria’s analysis pays special attention to borders—both those that we must cross (transcorporeal, ontological), and those that we must maintain in order to limit the human practices of capitalist extraction and exploitation that instrumentalize nature (the borders of ecologically sustainable living).

Fiction—Namwali Serpell’s novel *The Old Drift*—also offers a productive vantage point for Amit R. Baishya’s accounting for more-than-human national histories in “Zt.Zzt in the Anthropocene.” Focusing on the mosquitoes and drones in Serpell’s Zambian novel and their interactions with humans, Baishya demonstrates how the telling of national history subverts anthropocentric time while foregrounding heterotemporalities implicating nonhuman actors. It is not just that the novel’s sense of futurity decenters humans; it is rather that human obsolescence, hastened by error, marks the future—a future that prioritizes nonhuman assemblages. In Baishya’s reading, the novel “continuously out-scales humanist comprehensions of space-time via its arthropod, technological and cyborg narrator(s)” even as it “evinces planetary and inter-planetary dimensions simultaneously.” Baishya is also attentive to the crucial role that sound plays in the commingling of human and nonhuman actors in *The Old Drift*. Drawing on sonic and media studies and an impressive array of other interdisciplinary research, Baishya foregrounds the affordance of Serpell’s complex acoustic languages to the project of more-than-human postcolonial worlding.

In “Bodies of the Border,” English Brooks shifts the focus to the policing of migrants at the Mexico-United States border. While migrant and mobility discourses tend to center human bodies, Brooks targets another form of border porosity: the entanglement of human and nonhuman bodies at the scene of surveillance and exclusion. The article discusses the instrumentalization of nonhuman animals as a weapon of deterrence against migrants at the border but is also mindful of the role that nonhuman actors play to expose the violence against people seeking entry into the United States at the border. Whether it is in the discussion of grasshoppers’ disregard for border walls as they utilize holes in border barriers to move around, the brutalization of Haitian migrants by Border Patrol officials on horseback in a move that recalls slavery, or the use of dogs to attack nonhuman bodies, Brooks’s article details “the interspecies connections and tensions that ensue at the border.” The work “remind us of the various layers of disastrous impacts such walls and other barriers entail for local ecosystems, as well as for the nonhuman biota

that require passage through them as they move between sometimes distant seasonal ranges.”

Marta Sofía López’s article, “Border Gnoseology: Akwaeke Emezi and the Decolonial Other-than-Human,” offers an insightful and innovative account of nonhumanity that tackles the very definition of the term: its scope and perspective mediated by a conventional Eurocentric hu-Man-ity. Therefore, she broadens the vision of the natural world as a kaleidoscope of the material spirituality of the Other-than-human, shaped by African onto-epistemology (thus crossing over the natural, the sacred and the human into alternative readings of selfhood and identity). To do so, she makes use of Emezi’s archetypes of ogbanje and the sacred python as avatar of Ala and of “border gnoseology” as method—imbued by the tentacular networks of the Cthulucene. López is, then, painfully aware of the differences existing between realms and, thus, pleads for a better understanding of trans-realities: transing, tranimalcy and (transatlantic) crossing, to dismantle the ontological, religious and temporal borders of Western worldviews.

On her side, writing in French, Sara Buekens’s essay, “Raconter l’Anthropocène : le réalisme magique comme mimesis” delves into the environmental damages caused by oil extraction in the African Niger delta and Gabon. Hence, through the analysis of Bessora’s *Petroleum* (2004) and Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water* (2010), the author opts for Magic Realism as the best tool to reflect the present unstable climatic situation, and make ecological problems visible. Among the manifold reasons provided stand the capacity to bestow direct agency on nature by the transgression of the literary norms and the suspension of disbelief implicit in the genre. Also, the capacity of mingling alternative universes, putting together different subaltern stories, proves especially relevant to bring human ecological harm to the frontline. Finally, in the subjective retelling of the more-than-human realm, Magic Realism acts as the best catalyst filter to contest the environmental crisis caused by the pillage of natural resources exerted by wild capitalism.

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