

Review Essay: Postcolonial Literatures and Climate Change

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Russell McDougall, John C. Ryan, and Pauline Reynolds, eds. *Postcolonial Literatures of Climate Change* (Brill, 2022), 408 pp.

Justina Poray-Wybranowska, *Climate Change, Ecological Catastrophe, and the Contemporary Postcolonial Novel* (Routledge, 2020), 236 pp.

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Human induced climate change is closely linked to the territorialising and exploitative practices of colonisation. Although differing greatly in its details between disparate colonised regions and colonising powers, wherever it occurred, the European-led colonial enterprise appropriated land and redirected natural resources towards the colonisers, destroyed previously existing land care practices, fragmented cultural relationships that were interconnected with those practices, and established extractive, industrialised modes of engaging with the land. These activities established economic networks, legal frameworks for property ownership, social institutions, and social and moral values that have continued to frame environmental attitudes and practices in exploitative terms, even after the colonising relationships have ended. In regions negotiating with their environmental relationships in the aftermath of colonial control, the legacy of those colonial practices and institutions is profound. Furthermore, colonial relationships are not limited to those of the past, but continue in many parts of the world, taking many different forms. As widespread environmental exploitation has begun to dramatically change earth's climate systems, it has become clear that many of the most adversely affected regions have a recent colonial past or are still embroiled within colonial practices. Further, the people most affected by climate change in these regions are those who suffer or have suffered most from the colonial experience. It is not surprising, therefore, that many powerful recent literary engagements with climate change have been written by authors with direct experience of disadvantage or loss within postcolonial societies.

The two books reviewed here both respond to a rapidly growing interest within academia and policy development in approaches towards understanding and responding to climate change from postcolonial perspectives. Justina Poray-Wybranowska's *Climate Change, Ecological Catastrophe, and the Contemporary Postcolonial Novel* (2020) is a monograph focussing on six novels out of which three

are set in South Asia and the other three in Australasia. *Postcolonial Literatures of Climate Change* (2022), edited by Russell McDougall, John C. Ryan, and Pauline Reynolds is an edited collection spanning many areas of the postcolonial world and a wide range of literary texts. Between them, the texts explore a wide range of postcolonial literary responses to climate change. The two texts share largely similar underlying motivations. Both provide introductions that link climate change to the extractive dynamic of colonialism and embrace the hope that literature can change attitudes and action. They moreover identify postcolonial literature as having a notable capacity to encounter climate change in ways that are affective, personal, and connected to everyday reality. In doing this, they position themselves as furthering a discussion raised by Amitav Ghosh in *The Great Derangement* (2016) relating to the inadequacy of literary responses to climate change.

Reading these books together provided me with a valuable depth and breadth on this topic I would have missed from reading either one alone. This is because the two works approach the topic differently and discuss a different selection of texts. Out of the two works, the monograph is more politically and historically focussed. Poray-Wybranowska explores in depth six postcolonial novels, all published between 1999 and 2015, representing Indigenous, marginalised, or dispossessed perspectives from two regions, the South Pacific and South Asia, both of which were British colonies. For each novel, she provides a relevant and concise historical and political context and a thematically structured discussion. On the other hand, the edited collection has a much wider geographical, historical, and literary scope. It scans literature across disparate global regions which have widely varied relationships to colonial pasts and presents, from the Caribbean to Antarctic icebergs. The chapters are loosely organised by geography moving through riverine, island, tropical, desert, and polar geographies. The specific locations reflect current climate change concerns, with significant attention to islands and the polar regions. The narrative perspectives of the literature discussed through the chapters is much broader and not limited to Indigenous or disenfranchised perspectives, novels, or recent works as it includes historic literary texts and works by well-established white male authors from settler colonial backgrounds as well.

Poray-Wybranowska's *Climate Change, Ecological Catastrophe, and the Contemporary Postcolonial Novel* is scholarly, with a well-articulated argument supported succinctly by relevant theory. In the manner of a monograph derived from a thesis, a problem is established, relevant theory and the political, historical, and social contexts of the problem are investigated, and an argument for a potential solution is suggested. The author argues that the colonial imagination has developed within the protection of the privilege of colonial occupation and is therefore disconnected from the everyday suffering and continued destruction that affords it its protected position. Following Amitav Ghosh, she therefore suggests that colonial literature is unable to cope with the everyday reality of the catastrophe that is the current state of this climate changed world. These colonial narrative forms and styles fail in this regard because they consider catastrophe as unusual, isolated events that

cause a change to otherwise normal affairs, which remain essentially comfortable and predictable. By contrast, postcolonial literature from the perspectives of people who are Indigenous and dispossessed does not assume a predictable and comfortable normal state of being. Novels such as those discussed in her book provide ways of knowing catastrophe as everyday lived experience because this is the reality for many marginalised peoples within postcolonial situations. The author's central point is that narratives capable of the imaginative possibilities needed to live within a climate changed future must be able to express catastrophe as everyday lived experience, and that therefore postcolonial novels from the perspectives of Indigenous and dispossessed people are well equipped for this challenge.

Each of the six novels take place within situations where individuals, groups, and families are living out the legacies of colonial violence in settings where environmental, political, social, cultural, and personal histories were destroyed and rewritten through the changes imposed through British colonial impositions, both directly and indirectly. Three of the works, Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and Uzma Aslam Khan's *Thinner than Skin* (2012) are set in South Asia. The other three, Kim Scott's *Benang* (1999), Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006), and Patricia Grace's *Potiki* (1986) are set in Australia/New Zealand. Each thematic discussion is aligned with the most relevant pair of novels and supported by relevant theory. All six plots recount experiences of traumatic survival in environments and social and political structures made barely liveable by the legacies of colonial exploitation and extraction. These are stories in which lives are dismantled, trauma repeated and multiscalar, and the experience of catastrophe is constant and sustained for at least some of the characters. Through varying degrees, all of them reflect the reality of survival among postcolonial legacies of environmental and social destruction. Wright's *Carpentaria* is not a realist novel in the way in which Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* is realist, but its magical elements and fictionalised environments communicate the visceral experience of trauma, loss, and disempowerment of First Nations people in Northern Australia.

The discussion of these novels is structured around three broad themes: catastrophe, vulnerability, and human relationships; catastrophe and human-non-human relationships in degraded environments; and land justice, resistance, recovery. Poray-Wybranowska's analysis focuses on uncovering the literary and narrative devices that these postcolonial writers have used to make real the experiences of living in a permanent catastrophe. Some of the narrative features she considers are the various approaches the authors use to convey trauma, the significance of the role of non-human animals, the use of rhythm and cyclicity to invoke connection to land, and the alignment of bodies and the land to demonstrate vulnerability and damage and as a source of hope. These literary methods, she suggests, might support the kinds of thinking human societies and individuals will increasingly need as we all find ourselves surviving within constant climate-change-induced catastrophe. They may offer clues to the kinds of imaginative strategies that can enable recognition, support grieving, and sustain hope, resistance, and recovery.

For me, this interest in narrative devices capable of supporting new imaginaries for a climate changed future was the most exciting and innovative aspect of the work, as it offers genuine analytic insight that can promote change. However, this aspect could have been further developed by way of some detailed recounting of the plotlines of the selected novels.

A range of historical documents are discussed alongside the textual analysis to add depth to the historical contexts of these novels. Likewise, analytic frames and theory from disaster studies, animal studies, postcolonial studies, and ecocriticism are drawn upon for the analysis. At times, the discussion struggled to live up to its ambitious goals, offering an overview of some substantial theoretical traditions, while ignoring debate or counterclaims. The intent of the approach however is to show how the multitude of theoretical frames support each other, and together strengthen and deepen an analysis in order to address climate change concerns alongside issues of power and justice. The book generally succeeds in achieving this goal. Its limited historical and geographical scope raises questions as to the applicability of the analysis beyond these two regions, however Poray-Wybranowska is careful and thorough in justifying her choices and the limits selected for this work.

Postcolonial Literatures of Climate Change extends the scope of postcolonial literature beyond conventional limits, illustrating the extent and diversity of climate-change related challenges emerging within postcolonial political, economic, and cultural contexts. The chapters collect twelve varied and sometimes unconventional perspectives on postcolonial writing that encounter climate change. Chapters about the exploitation of Nauru for phosphate and for the detention of asylum seekers (by Paul Sharrad), rising waters in Hawaii (by Craig Santos Perez), activist responses to climate change in Inuit lands (by Renee Hulan), and the destruction of Nubian homelands through dam construction (by Amany Dahab) remind readers that colonial impositions continue to impact environments and communities in many guises, alongside postcolonial resistance and critique, which also take many forms. Entries about Antarctica (by Hanne E.F. Nielsen) and Antarctic icebergs (by Elizabeth Leane) suggest that even the most remote regions must acknowledge past and ongoing colonial impacts and escape the embedded tropes of colonial literary representations—in this case as the ultimate heroic or pristine destination—and struggle to develop a postcolonial literary presence better able to confront climate change. Chapters which focus on the Southern Beech (the Gondwanan tree genus *Nothofagus*) within poetry from South America, New Zealand, and Papua New Guinea (by John C. Ryan); the monsoon in Malaysian literature (by Agnes S. K. Yeow); Sargassum seaweed in writing from the Caribbean (by Kaisa Mika and Sally Stainier); and writing that expresses the personhood of the Whanganui River (by Chris Prentice) all foreground non-human agency in eliciting and shaping literary responses, thereby successfully integrating a material ecocritical perspective through the book. These contributions highlight the importance of non-humans as communicative leaders in creative works that aspire to move beyond Anthropocentric perspectives and assumptions.

The volume does not aim to be a comprehensive overview of the field. Rather, the chapters predominantly offer intense dives into one or a few literary responses to specific climate-change related contexts. Apart from the first piece by Geoffrey V. Davis, which is a general discussion of the relationship between activism and literature, the texts make solid contributions within their particular regional or topical literary contexts, many of which are specific and local. They do not review the postcolonial literary responses to climate change pertaining to their region or issue of concern, nor is there any suggestion that they would. While all the works do justice to their topics, their connections to postcolonial literary responses to climate change are varied. Davis' chapter is notable for having little reference to climate change, perhaps partly explained by its posthumous publication.

The substantive introduction explains the need for a broad review of postcolonial literatures of climate change read as a literature of resistance. It presents a valuable summary of work in this area including a discussion of several important texts and concepts that are not included elsewhere within the volume, before introducing the sections. A coda situates the discussion within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, reflecting upon the role of pandemics within literatures of political resistance and critique. Taken as a whole, the book feels fragmented, with little sense of themes building across or between parts, and little attention from the editors towards pulling out insights distilled from across the contributions of this collected work. I would have appreciated such an addition in the Introduction as, without it, the work is harder to engage with. Like most of the chapters, the Introduction has a forward-looking sense. The focus is upon exploring literary attempts in order to think into a postcolonial awareness that can contribute towards surviving climate change and mitigating its damage. It is less concerned with providing a detailed historical or political review of the damage (although this is also provided, particularly in Dahab's piece). Perhaps this lends the volume an overall optimistic or at least hopeful tone, with the suggestion that, if colonialism has been the problem, postcolonial literary approaches are aligned with solutions in terms of thinking, knowing, and relating that can potentially sustain a future beyond environmental and social exploitation.

Where Poray-Wybranowska postulated that contemporary postcolonial literature points the way towards surviving climate changed futures because these works portray disaster as an everyday reality and suggest narrative responses to survival within a lived catastrophe, *Postcolonial Literatures of Climate Change* seems to make a different claim regarding the efficacy of postcolonial literature in this context. In this publication the emphasis steers towards relational ways of knowing and being with the more-than-human milieux. The tone is often more optimistic as there is a sense across many of these chapters that postcolonial writing as resistance can achieve something stronger than mere survival and that it may still yet lead to transformation.

Together, these two books establish a thought provoking, theoretically and textually grounded basis for the study of postcolonial literatures of climate change.

This is an avenue of enquiry of increasing importance that has the potential to connect cross-disciplinarily with studies in social theory, ecocriticism, literatures of climate change, and interdisciplinary studies across the environmental humanities.

Works Cited

Ghosh, Amitav. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. Chicago University Press, 2016.