Imperialism, Narrative, and the Environment

Rachel Carson Center

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Sponsors: Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society

Conveners: Anthony Carrigan (Keele University, UK/ RCC), Christof Mauch (RCC)

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With its focus on environmental challenges such as climate change, resource management, food security, disaster, and toxicity, this workshop offered discussions of ecological problems in connection with questions of historical and contemporary imperialism and environmental justice. Notions of imperialism and environment are embedded in the cultural imagination and its articulations in language, narratives, and the media. At this conference, issues like agency, power structures, marginalization, silencing, and knowledge forms were discussed by international scholars from the humanities and social sciences. This disciplinary variety inspired lively debates on the role of the humanities – in particular postcolonial studies – and their theoretical and methodological paradigms in the face of global environmental crises.

The workshop started with a keynote lecture by historian **DAVID ARNOLD** on "The Empire of Nature: Travel, Self, and Transformation." Arnold pointed out that, over the last 25 years, nature

and empire have become increasingly entangled. He used the concept of empire as a sign of epistemological engagement and examined to what extent (pre-colonial) inhabitants are valorised. To discuss these approaches, he divided his keynote speech into three parts. First, he introduced the audience to several Indian writings, including *Aranyak*, a famous Bengali novel written in the 1930s. In the second part of his speech he turned to poison and pollution, an aspect that was ignored by colonial narration but that has evolved as a powerful trope in postcolonial discourse, for example with the discussion of the Bhopal disaster in 1984. The third aspect of his speech concerned the environmentalism of the poor. Arnold argued that environmentalism is mostly discussed by middle and upper caste Indians. In this context the question of agency arises: Who dominates in the pollution narrative and to what extent? He wondered if it is better to speak of environmentalism "by" the poor or "of" the poor.

The first panel session, Epistemologies of Climate Change, began with a discussion of the paper "Combining Knowledge Types to Address Climate Change and Other Disaster Risk Reduction Concerns," written by **ILAN KELMAN** and two of his colleagues. The paper revaluated the importance of indigenous knowledge in the context of disaster risk reduction with respect to climate change, and developed frameworks for risk management and development action that combine indigenous environmental knowledge with formalised scientific knowledge. Participants noted that it is important to avoid the imposition of one knowledge form (mostly the scientific) onto the other knowledge form (mostly indigenous) in order to avoid the enactment of "unwelcome power relations," even if the process of surveying and evaluating different knowledge forms is complicated by local social power structures. **GEORGE B. HANDLEY**'s essay, "The Poetics of Global Climate Change and the Work of Derek Walcott," reflected on the ethics and theology of climate change. He traced the shared origins of and links between colonialism and the climate crisis to an instrumentalist understanding of nature and suggested that Derek Walcott's poetry offers a corrective to this idea of nature as commodity. Expanding eco-theologian Northcott's concept of "pre-Enlightenment earth stories" beyond religious texts, Handley stressed the creative quality of Walcott's poetry, which articulates life's continuous process of creation and thereby counters Judeo-Christian narratives of domination of the natural world. **ELIZABETH DELOUGHREY**'s contribution, "Ordinary Futures: Interspecies Worldings in an Era of Climate Change," focused on oceanic space and narratives of oceanic futures that reject the common apocalypticism of climate change discourse. Not only can apocalyptic narratives create disillusionment, alienation, and a feeling of helplessness, but the spectacle of apocalypse also inhibits the recognition of "non-spectacular ecological violence" (DeLoughrey 1). She noted an alternative approach to climate change in Keri Hulme's short story collection *Stonefish*, which narrates stories of a "profoundly ordinary future" (ibid.) and points to strategies of environmental adaptation.

The second panel, Resource Extraction and World Ecology, investigated the role(s) commodities, such as oil and sugar, play in narratives. Two important questions were raised: should books be seen as a commodity? And are all modern novels in fact oil novels? **MICHAEL NIBLETT** addressed a number of important issues concerning the commodities of oil and sugar in "Oil on Sugar: Commodity Frontiers and Peripheral Aesthetics," but most importantly "the social significance of these commodities and the demands of aesthetic representation" (Niblett 1). His discussion ranged from the multiple levels and temporalities of sugar and oil to the significance of parabolic oscillations to questions around the inseparability of environmental and social changes in connection with these commodities. The paper proposed two new concepts: "petro-magic-realism" and "saccharine-irrealism." These concepts and the representation of oil in general tie in with the notion of Gothic tropes, where the Gothic sublime often displaces the individual. This notion provided a perfect transition to the discussion of **SHARAE DECKARD**'s exploration of "*Oboroten* Spectres: Lycanthropy, Petrofiction, and New Russia in Victor Pelevin," in which she questioned the ways in which "phantasmic metaphorics of lyncathropy and vampirism" (Deckard 2) can be used to picture economies of oil, and in particular "the violent conversion into an ecological regime based on petroleum extraction" (ibid). "The Nature of Violence: Political Ecology and African Pirate Stories" by **BYRON CAMINERO-SANTANGELO** provided a valuable closing discussion. The role of oil was again considered and was portrayed as a source of global violence and constant pollution and contamination. More specifically, in the novels that Caminero-Santangelo discussed, it is made clear "that the current conditions in the delta and Somalia result not from archaic divisions, violence, and criminality, but from socio-ecological degradation" (Caminero-Santangelo 1).

The panel entitled Gardening, Ecology, Food Sovereignty began with a discussion of **SUSAN K. MARTIN**'s paper "What is a Native Garden? Gardening with Indigenous Plants, Environmental Language and Literature in Australia." The paper examined the notion of "native" gardens in Australia – gardens not necessarily planted by Aboriginal people but rather gardens that consist of plants that are indigenous to Australia. Native gardens are sometimes regarded as an attempt to reconcile the Australian indigenous and settler populations. "Unearthing Ecology: Plant-hunting and the Eco-Archaic in Reginald Farrer's *My Rock Garden*" by **JILL DIDUR** investigated rock and alpine gardens as other forms of colonial control. Didur's paper points out that values are often ascribed to gardens and gardening, and that plants are presented as anthropomorphic. Gardens frequently also represent micro-climates – in the case of Didur's discussion, rock and alpine micro-climates. Finally, **LISA PARAVISINI-GEBERT**'s "Food, Biodiversity, Extinctions: Caribbean Fauna and the Struggle for Food Security during the Conquest of the New World" considered the combination of visual and literary texts by analyzing a narrative about food scarcity of colonists. This contribution illustrated both in written and pictorial form the vulnerability of island spaces by using the example

of "the New World's first food fight" (Paravisini-Gebert 1). This paper emphasized how the delicate ecosystems on islands often collapse and result in endangerment or even extinction of species. At the same time, the introduction of non-native species that ultimately become invasive species leads to a natural imbalance.

The first day concluded with a session on Disaster, Vulnerarbility, Planetarity, with Anthony Carrigan and Graham Huggan. Both presenters aimed to point out fundamental deficits in postcolonial studies. Barbadian poet and historian Kamau Brathwaite served as an example in **ANTHONY CARRIGAN**'s presentation "Towards a Postcolonial Disaster Studies." He argued that postcolonial studies and disaster studies reciprocally influence each other. A disaster does not have to be unforeseen and fast; it can be a chronic or a slow-onset disaster, categories which include poverty, debt, ecological degradation, and militarism. Carrigan also pointed out the intimate relationship between power, exploitation, violence, and disaster, with reference to Nixon's concept of "slow violence." The core question was: How is the rhetoric of disaster designed? In his contribution entitled "Notes on the Postcolonial Arctic," **GRAHAM HUGGAN** criticized the "Anglo hegemony" (a phrase coined by Jonathan Arac) in postcolonialism and presented his new project on the postcolonial Arctic. His aim is to combine several of his academic interests into a cultural exploration of the Arctic, mainly focussed on the European Arctic (in contrast to the North American and Russian Arctic), collaborating with scholars and institutes in Greenland, Iceland, and Norway. In his project, Huggan sees an opportunity to engage in a more planetary-oriented discourse that further extends the meaning of "postcolonial" conceptually and geographically.

The fifth panel, Environmental Justice and Environmentalisms of the Poor, began with **ANTHONY VITAL**'s paper entitled "Reading for a Postcolonial Planet: Literature and Environmental Justice." Vital argued that "reading always happens in some relation to home" (4). He suggested that it can be a powerful tool to bring together postcolonialism, development, and environmental justice, even though the first two have only recently been linked in theory and the latter two are often in conflict with each other. In her contribution, entitled "Aesthetics, Ethics, Politics: Representations of Environmentalism of the Poor," **SANGEETA RAY** argued that aesthetics of planetarity are different from other directional moves. Terms such as "postcolonial," "diaspora," and "transnational" were all confined to certain governmental spaces; the planetary, however, ignores these spaces. The turn to the planet offers paradigms that move beyond the dominant US discourse. **JORGE MARCONE**'s paper, "Slow Wars: Filming the Environmentalism of the Poor in Latin America," analysed how slow wars are represented by focusing on the filming of the environmentalism of the poor in Latin America. Two major components of slow wars are extractivism and neo-colonial acts like privatization of water. Marcone linked his concept with Rob Nixon's notion of slow violence:

both are attritional forces to which the poor are disproportionately exposed.

The sixth panel focused on questions of Environmental Relocation and Resistance. **JAMES D. RICE** presented "Indigenous Peoples, Colonialism, and the Environment in Modern North America" as part of his current research project, which aims at chronicling the environmental history of indigenous North American societies and the destructive effects of modern colonialism. Modern colonialism is characterised by its environmentally transformative force. New technologies and the new energy regimes connected to them, liberal ideologies, exploitation of natural resources, and epidemics all collaborated in the decimation and oppression of indigenous communities. Another perspective on relocation and resistance was adopted by **JENNIFER WENZEL** in her contribution on filmic representations of surplus people and global apartheid, entitled "Surplus People, Repurposed Forms: Global/Apartheid." In her paper, Wenzel extrapolated the notion of surplus people from the historical specificities of apartheid South Africa to the concept of global apartheid. The systemic structures, Wenzel argued, are similar in other systems of injustice. Indeed, global apartheid is an inherent aspect of the exploitative geographies of neoliberal globalisation, with capitalist ideology assigning economical rather than ethical value to humans. **MEENAKSHI SHARMA**'s essay discussed the question "Where Do the Poor Go? Ecological Refugees as Conservation's Detritus in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*." Ecological refugees, a term commonly denoting people exiled or displaced because of environmental catastrophes, conservation policies, or political decision making, are specifically marginalised and socioeconomically disadvantaged. Sharma argued that the literary form of the novel (with its freedom from disciplinary constraints) proves to be more epistemologically powerful than other literary genres and represents the social, political, historical, economic, and environmental complexities of ecological refugees' living conditions.

The second day's final session was a two-paper panel concerned with Global Mappings. In "Planet and Narration: The Brundtland Commission Public Hearings and the Global Symbolic," **CHERYL LOUSLEY** analysed the globalism of the Brundtland Commission reports and the imagination of a global community that this "world commission" attempted to represent. Globalism, however, always exists in a localised plurality, defying universality through localised articulations of global standpoints or initiatives. Despite this multiplicity of possible globalisms, the Brundtland Commission hearings provided the conveners with the opportunity to performatively conjure a coherent "imagined global democratic community" (Lousley 10). **AMY M. HAY**, in her contribution entitled "'I Love the Smell of Napalm in the Morning': Imperialism, Jungles, and Resistance in South Vietnam," showed how the literary and filmic environmental illness narratives of Vietnam War veterans retrospectively challenge the imperial discourse of the tropical environment/the jungle as an embodiment of resistance. Suffering from toxic contamination and the long-term effects of defoli-

ants and other environmental toxins, veterans in the United States produced texts of "popular epidemiology" that challenged the scientific discourse that promoted the harmlessness of dioxins used during the war. These texts, as well as texts written by Vietnamese authors, provide a counter-narrative to the ecological imperialism endorsed by the U.S. military and eliminate the justification for the extensive use of herbicides.

The Closing Panel highlighted the fact that there is still a lot of research that has to be done in the area of the environmentally oriented postcolonial humanities. Some of the issues raised were: the position of the ecological in postcolonialism; the contribution of postcolonial ecocriticism to the humanities; the tensions between globality and the planetary; the tension between historical and literary narrative; the need for an adequate critical framework for environmental justice; the canon; the controversy surrounding population and overpopulation; and more nuanced definitions of imperialism(s), global capitalism, and capitalist imperialism. Participants noted that many universities still lack environmental/postcolonial programmes; comparative literary studies are still quite uncommon as well. In conclusion, participants agreed that in order to progress, pragmatic solutions will be necessary and activism outside the academy should receive more attention.

- Heidi Danzl (PhD student, University of Salzburg)
- Yvonne Kaisinger (PhD student, University of Salzburg)
- Hanna Straß (PhD student, LMU)