

## Materiality and Nature: Writing Africa in the Anthropocene

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Cajetan Iheka's *Naturalizing Africa: Ecological Violence, Agency, and Postcolonial Resistance* joins a recent spate of scholarly work within postcolonial and world literary studies that seeks to move from the more overtly textual horizons of the field in its earlier decades to a broader and more diffuse reckoning with the world in its materiality. Central to the text is its attempt to rethink African literature by examining "the status of African environments as sacrifice zones for discarded discontents of globalization," with a particular emphasis on "how oil pollution, deforestation, and conflict that arise as a result of power struggle and resource extraction impact more than human bodies."<sup>1</sup> Contributing to both what has been called the "ecocritical" turn in literary studies and, to an extent, the spatial turn in postcolonial criticism, the study bears many of the hallmark characteristics of these emerging subdisciplines with its focus on the global, as the necessary scale through which to think through seemingly localized experiences and responses, its insistence on a more expansive definition of *agency* than that which is displayed in the term's commonplace usage, and its desire to expand the horizons through which we think the urgency of the literary, as a site of inquiry.

The study's central claim is that a more rigorous attention to the literary constitution of the entanglements that define human and nonhuman relations is essential to a robust understanding of environmental crises and the responses so engendered:

Considering the entanglement of both human and nonhuman lives on the continent . . . I argue for taking seriously nonhuman lives—plants, animals, sea life, and so on—caught in the tragedy of ecological devastation in Africa. In the story that this book tells, the resilience, agency, and resistance of humans are pertinent, but also paramount are the active roles that nonhumans assume in the literary texts.<sup>2</sup>

This attempt, to produce a holistic reading of the interconnections that have both produced the notion of Africa as a marginal space, a "sacrifice zone," so to speak, upon

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1 Cajetan Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa: Ecological Violence, Agency, and Postcolonial Resistance* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 158.

2 Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa*, 158.

which the detritus of late capitalist modernity might be offloaded, as well as the manner in which African literary imaginations resist such a consignment, comes as a welcome redress to perspectives that continue to rely on an all-too-blunt conception of humanism as their locus of inquiry. Iheka argues that the human/nonhuman entanglements at the core of the vision of the world produced in African literary writing have to be thought across the four registers of proximity: “multispecies presence, interspecies relations, distributed agency, and indistinction between humans and other life forms,”<sup>3</sup> enabling a more nuanced encounter with the ways in which human and nonhuman life both coexist and intertwine with each other. The organizing structure of *Naturalizing Africa* bookends what are essentially four thematic, literary critical chapters with reflections on the intersection—or extension—of the discursive into the material. Drawing on a hodgepodge of theoretical sources and frameworks characteristic more broadly of the modes of bricolage that postcolonial critique has made commonplace, *Naturalizing Africa* traverses material ranging from the war novels of Nuruddin Farah to Wangari Maathai’s memoir *Unbowed*, J. M. Coetzee’s *The Life and Times of Michael K.*, Amos Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, and Gabriel Okara’s *The Voice*. The breadth and ambition of the project speaks in many ways to both the increasingly enlarged field of study encompassed by postcolonial literary critique and to the demands of coverage increasingly made acute in the contemporary landscape of academic publishing. Equally, there is a sense that this is a work firmly located in an intellectual field in which area studies no longer dominate the way to “think” Africa in favor of a more expansive, comparative approach in which the nuances of detailed geographical knowledge give way to a broad-based understanding of the larger dynamics through which the continent has been and is being positioned in a contemporary world system.

If at the core of *Naturalizing Africa* is an attempt to recenter literature’s “important role in elucidating and informing” the ways in which we understand ecological crises and responses,<sup>4</sup> then I am broadly sympathetic with these claims. The literary, that is, may well prove to be a staging ground for the unravelling of alternate life-worlds—including those with radically different systems of (re)production and social metabolism than our own—which can open avenues for thinking our shared futures, as coinhabitants of the planet, differently. My comments here, then, are intended in a spirit of camaraderie, foregrounding areas through which postcolonial, world literary, and ecocritical studies might more firmly engage in a mode of critique grounded in the materiality of the world in which we live, the better to uncover its often-occluded modes of functioning.

The first point that I would like to make about this work, a point that resonates with much of the scholarly work that appears under the guise of postcolonial literary criticism, is the extent to which the study, for all of its emphasis on the relationship between the literary and the material, the very real crises of exploitation and despoliation that have shaped Africa’s environments, and their textualization, leaves the question of capital largely unspoken beyond a few generalized criticisms of neoliberalism and late capitalism. This comes to the fore in three related aspects of the

3 Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa*, 17–18.

4 Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa*, 1.

work, which I will trace below: its handling of gender as a category of analysis; its larger positioning of the human as agent under the epoch of the so-called Anthropocene; and its attentiveness to the dynamics of the very markets that have produced the literary imaginings under examination.

Gender serves as something of an unspoken counterpoint across *Naturalizing Africa*, whether in the specifically gendered dimensions of the *Palm-Wine Drinkard's* negotiation of the nonhuman world in an era of rapid sociopolitical change, manifested through the position of the Drinkard's wife and constant companion; the import of gender and the eroticization of human/nonhuman relationships in *The Whale Caller*; or the specter of maternity across *The Famished Road*. More overtly, chapter 4 of *Naturalizing Africa*, titled "Resistance from the Ground: Agriculture, Gender and Manual Labor," is the only chapter of the work to explicitly contend with gender as an axis along which the ecological determination of power and resistance occur in an African context. To do so, the chapter strives to "concentrate on the ways that farming, gardening, afforestation practices, and similar land-use measures constitute resistance to hegemonic, patriarchal, and other oppressive strictures," on the one hand, and explore "grassroots mobilization and efforts that directly challenge the status quo,"<sup>5</sup> on the other. The inclusion of gender as an explicit site of analysis in the study is welcome and speaks to the increased attention that has been given to women's writing and sexual difference as categories of import in African literatures. At the same time, the way in which gender is addressed opens itself to a number of questions: why, for instance, is gender largely read through an engagement with the land and cultivation, analogies that run the risk of reifying the woman-as-first-nature mythos? Equally, what is the value, for thinking about gendered resistance in the face of ecological violence, in taking a largely literary-critical, textual approach to the question? How do the fissures between author and text mediate the ways in which gender, agency, and resistance are constituted? Is gender merely a supplement to a larger framework of subjectivity, or strategy of resistance, as its textualization might sometimes imply?

What my comments here are attempting to indicate is the extent to which these readings do not quite manage to allow us full scope to view gender not merely as one way in which thinking about nature and the environment but rather as fundamental to their analysis as both a driver and a product of society-nature relations. Here it is worth recalling the observations made by Marxian feminist criticism and human geography around the fundamentally gendered status of nature, and, more specifically, the gendered dialectic that functions across first and second nature. As critics ranging from Henri Lefebvre to Neil Smith to Silvia Federici to Maria Mies have all argued, in different contexts, there has long existed a division between the notion of first nature—that largely unknowable, essential, reproductive (feminized) Other—and second nature, better conceived of as the (masculinized) machine of society, its very purpose to dominate and "pacify" the former the better to generate value and productivity. As Elmar Flatschart notes, this dialectic relationship between first and second nature means that all society-nature relationships are, by design, gendered: "first nature is not neutral or a-social; it was originally produced in early modernity as something at odds

5 Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa*, 127.

with culture/society. In this phase, (white, western) men and the ‘male’ symbolic logic they represent are developing on the basis of their opposition to everything female that has consequentially been naturalized.”<sup>6</sup> This is particularly crucial to recall in the context of resource-extraction, where, as Flatschart continues:

The phallic capitalist machine is driven by abstract energy relations, but it requires some concrete determination, which it finds in feminized first nature. Just as it should be evident that capitalist productive labor cannot survive without the kind of reproductive work that is usually attributed to women/feminized subjects, it is obvious that nature eventually reproduces the energy system that propels the production of surplus value. If this reproduction fails, form-immanent contradictions must increase. It is important to see that the relation to nature that energy mediates is not one sided, but dialectical.<sup>7</sup>

Turning to the African context in which Iheka’s work is based, this need, to view the essentially gendered nature of society-nature relationships, is particularly urgent, given the long-term historical feminization of the continent in the discursive and material structures of the global imaginary. In this context, the idea that “land cultivation is portrayed as an alternative to the destruction that patriarchal systems enact in all three narratives” sits uneasily within this critical-theoretical matrix,<sup>8</sup> suggesting, as it does, a reinforcement of the woman-as-nature/woman-as-land formulation upon which the international division of labor under capitalist-patriarchy is itself predicated.<sup>9</sup>

In a recent piece on the future of the commons, David Harvey, in what is seemingly a simple aside, clarifies his use of the phrase “so-called natural” by noting that “I say ‘so-called natural’ because all resources are technological, economic, and cultural appraisals and therefore socially defined.”<sup>10</sup> Here, Harvey gestures toward another critical issue for environmental and ecocritical humanities: what, precisely, is the nature of nature? How can this nature be invoked without making recourse to the first/second nature dialectic previously discussed? What are the specific mechanisms that affect African environments today that we must understand through these terms? Here I return to Flatschart’s observation that “the second-nature character of the energetic fix produces nature and nature reproduces this energetic mediation. Limits like peak oil are not natural in a simple sense; first nature must be seen as coproduced by second nature.”<sup>11</sup> While not wishing to engage in a crude economic determinism in reading the essentially gendered foundation of resource extraction and environmental despoliation, I contend that the point nonetheless remains that the very system of social (re)production constituted—and itself constituent of—that entity we call “nature” functions at its core through the fabricated gendered dichotomies and

6 Elmar Flatschart, “Crisis, Energy, and the Value Form of Gender: Towards a Gender-Sensitive Materialist Understanding of Society-Nature Relations,” in *Materialism and the Critique of Energy*, eds. Brent Ryan Bellamy and Jeff Diamanti (Chicago: MCM Publishing, 2018), 121–58, esp. 139.

7 Flatschart, “Crisis, Energy, and the Value Form of Gender,” 141.

8 Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa*, 126.

9 See for instance, Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour 3e* (London: Zed, 2014 [1986]).

10 David Harvey, “The Future of the Commons,” *Radical History Review* 109 (2011): 101–07, esp. 103.

11 Flatschart, “Crisis, Energy, and the Value Form of Gender,” 144.

dialectics upon which the international division of labor—which has, not coincidentally, acted as a driving force in Africa’s environmental crises—is predicated. Given the emphasis in *Naturalizing Africa* on the role of what Carmody has termed “the new scramble for Africa,”<sup>12</sup> particularly the drive to control resource extraction and mineral wealth, this strikes me as a significant point through which to attend to the specific dynamics that produce African environments as we understand them in both their historical and contemporary guises, and a crucial framework through which to understand the mechanisms of their literary representations and deformations.

One term that has gained considerable critical purchase in recent years—and one invoked by Iheka early in the pages of *Naturalizing Africa*—which attempts to delineate this relationship is that of the Anthropocene. As Iheka notes, the Anthropocene (or, as it is sometimes called, the Capitalocene) refers to that era in which human beings emerge as the primary geological force acting upon the planet.<sup>13</sup> The origins of the Anthropocene remain a point of debate for scholars invested in that term, though many identify the Industrial Revolution as that era where the shift of balance in planetary agency first occurred. Yet, as Daniel Cunha has noted, there is something problematic in this recentering of the human as agent as an explicating force for our current times. Given the rapidity (and seemingly intractable nature of) climate change, resource extraction, environmental despoliation, and more, one cannot help but wonder just how in control the human actually is, just how much agency the ultimate agent truly might be said to have. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the crises I have just cited are all, themselves, driven less by human agency and more by the irrepressible forward march of capital in its quest for surplus value, for accumulation for the sake of accumulation. As Cunha notes:

A system that becomes quasiautomatic, beyond the conscious control of those involved, and is driven by the compulsion of limitless accumulation as an end in itself, necessarily has as a consequence the disruption of the material cycles of the Earth. Calling this *Anthropocene*, though, is clearly imprecise, on one hand, because it is the outcome of a historically specific form of metabolism with Nature, and not of a generic ontological being (*antropo*), and, on the other hand, because capitalism constitutes a “domination without subject,” that is, in which the subject is not Man (not even a ruling class), but capital.<sup>14</sup>

Is it not the case, then, that the only solution to environmental catastrophe is less an approach that decenters the human than one that genuinely centers humanity beyond the sway of capital and its logic? These are questions with no easy answers, but a consideration of capital—and not merely through the hollow invocation of “late capitalism,” “global capitalism,” or “capitalist modernity”—strikes me as the only site upon which these serious and pressing debates can be staged. By removing the fetishism of human autonomy vis-à-vis the environment, perhaps only then could true

12 Pádraig Carmody, *The New Scramble for Africa* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011).

13 Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change,” *New Literary History* 43.1 (2012): 1–2, cited in Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa*, 9.

14 Daniel Cunha, “The Anthropocene as Fetishism,” in *Materialism and the Critique of Energy*, eds. Brent Ryan Bellamy and Jeff Diamanti (Chicago: MCM Publishing, 2018), 51–72, esp. 54.

paths to a more just and sustainable future be found. Indeed, one of the greatest lessons to be learned from *Naturalizing Africa* considers precisely this possibility. As Iheka notes in the study's concluding insight, rather than fall prey to the increasingly popular concept of the posthuman, it might be that developing a more robust claim toward a new, more expansive humanism could be that which enables humans to perceive their own entanglement—as one species among many, as one kind of being among many—with our nonhuman others, together at the mercy of capital and its impulses, and together in need of a new mode of social metabolism through which to create the world. This refusal to discard humanism outright speaks to a larger intellectual engagement with the material realities that have mediated the production of Africa, both as a discursive token and as a physical space, in the contemporary era. Here, Iheka's comments resonate with wider observations around, for instance, the continued positioning of the African continent as little more than a repository of raw materials ripe for exploitation, manufacturing, and profit elsewhere, and the ongoing asymmetry between what is characterized as aid and largesse toward the continent and the sheer value of that which has been extracted, exploited, and taken away for use.<sup>15</sup> Further considering the sheer scope of ecological debt to which the African continent is owed, *Naturalizing Africa's* determination to retain a notion of expansive humanism as part of its political project speaks to a vision of ecological justice that resists the dehumanization—and indeed, the naturalization—of the continent and its peoples.

My final point focuses on the question of the material circuits of production that define and delineate literary form in the contemporary marketplace. The questions of production, dissemination, and the institutions through which these are enacted must be central questions for any scholar of African literatures or otherwise. Here, I refer of course to the so-called materialist turn in postcolonial and world literary criticism. I wish to invoke these terms along more precise lines, however. If, as Iheka convincingly argues, literature functions as a critical staging ground against which questions of the environment and planetary futures are battled, it is essential to consider the material circuits that determine the contours and parameters of that staging ground. With respect to the texts explored in *Naturalizing Africa*, for instance, one cannot help but observe the dominance of works and authors consecrated in various ways by the global literary market: Nobel Prize winner Coetzee; Booker Prize winner Okri; Neustadt International Prize for Literature winner Farah; and more. Although Iheka helpfully gestures to more disparate material—particularly by reading memoir and other less “high literary” material alongside his core texts—there remains a question of why *these* books? It is also notable that these texts have all appeared in various ways in the centers of literary dominance, published, that is, by metropolitan publishing houses. What might the ecological vision be in texts published elsewhere, marketed elsewhere, less citable, less visible? What about within the burgeoning popular markets, particularly self-help, entrepreneurial, and religious, which determine the majority of the book market on the African continent? Questions of genre, valuation, and production are not merely incidental to the fabrication of the world as constituted within the literary text; rather, as numerous critics have debated over the years, they function as essential to its formation.<sup>16</sup> Given the worldwide decline in sales of literary

15 See Patrick Bond, *Looting Africa: The Economics of Exploitation* (London: Zed Books, 2006).

fiction, moreover, these questions become all the more relevant for thinking about the ways in which specific contexts of reading, and the reading cultures therein, shape and mold the ways in which texts are decoded and the expectations with which they arrive.<sup>17</sup>

*Naturalizing Africa* marks a great advancement in postcolonial, African, and world literary studies by its willingness to move beyond traditional literary critical frameworks, particularly in its framing introduction and conclusion. It is a work that asks us to think seriously about the relationship between the text and the world beyond it, connecting questions of aesthetic practice to their implications for our actual being in the world. If my comments point toward further avenues for thinking these questions, then they are intended merely to continue in the work the study sets out to do.

16 The debates over who writes African literature, for whom, from where, to where, and how are now so extensive and all-pervasive that I will not cite specific examples here.

17 See for instance Stephanie Newell, *West African Literatures: Ways of Reading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).