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Toward Insubordinate Nature

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Cajetan Iheka's *Naturalizing Africa: Ecological Violence, Agency, and Postcolonial Resistance in African Literature* appears at what seems like a breakthrough moment for environmental approaches to the study of African literature. Its publication in 2017 made *Naturalizing Africa* an anchoring text for the 2018 annual meeting of the African Literature Association (ALA), whose conference theme "The Environments of African Literature" attracted numerous scholars interested in questions germane to ecocriticism and the environmental humanities.

This sense of an emergent critical mass gathering around a critical approach felt eerily familiar. It reminded me of the biannual meeting of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE) that was hosted by Byron Santangelo at the University of Kansas in 2013. At that meeting, the robust postcolonial and environmental justice strands of ecocriticism suddenly burst into visibility for those in more conventional US- or Europe-oriented fields who hadn't been involved in or aware of them. ASLE originated in the early 1990s from within the Western Literature Association, an organization devoted to the literatures of the American West: Rocky Mountain highs and all that. The efforts of many scholars from various constituencies have been necessary to expand ASLE's purview to recognize other extant modes of environmental literary study in other parts of the world.

One of my worries about such breakthrough moments is that we might confuse institutional histories—of ASLE, or the ALA—with broader histories of writing about nature and with broader genealogies of environmental concern, within and beyond literary studies. As a scholar and teacher of African literature and environmental and energy humanities, I'm committed to complicating the notion that environmental concern is somehow "belated" among Africans, African writers, or critics of African literature. Just as African literature "begins" neither with the publication of *Things Fall Apart* in 1958, nor with the fabled meeting of "African Writers of English Expression" at Makerere in 1962, the imbrication of African and other postcolonial literatures with the environment doesn't begin in these recent pivotal moments.

One problem with the belatedness idea is that it reinforces pernicious narratives that critic-activists in postcolonial and African studies have been working for decades or more to challenge. Colonialism relied upon narratives of *diffusion* that posited Europe or the West as the origin from which all blessings flow, out toward the rest of

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the world. Consider the actuarial trickery in this kind of thinking, in which economic or ecological debts *to* the colonized world incurred by Europe were transposed into beneficent "gifts" *from* Europe, whether the gift of "civilization," literacy, Christianity, or now, I worry, environmental concern. Even my language in the previous sentence obscures the hard facts: by "economic or ecological debts," I mean dispossession from land and the theft of nature and the attempt to cast a mystifying veil of European knowledge and values over what was left. Those great theorists of anticolonial liberation praxis in the mid-twentieth century—Césaire, Fanon, Cabral—understood this theft of nature. So did the leaders of primary resistance movements in previous centuries.

In its opening moves, *Naturalizing Africa* echoes this notion of belatedness: an early section of Iheka's introduction is titled "Postcolonial Studies and the Late Environmental Turn." There Iheka embraces Rob Nixon's indispensable, groundbreaking 2005 enumeration of the "schisms" between postcolonialism and environmentalism,[1] without acknowledging important demurs and qualifications offered by postcolonial ecocritics including Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George Handley, Pablo Mukherjee, Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, and myself, about the ways in which the imbrications of nature and power have long been urgent matters of concern for anticolonial and postcolonial writers, critics, and activists, even if they predate the *institutional* consolidation of postcolonial ecocriticism as a subfield.

Nixon has a point when he warns in *Slow Violence* about retrofitting figures like Fanon with the label *environmentalist*, in part because of the coercive effects of state conservation projects on colonized peoples.[2] What do we talk about when we talk about environmentalism? This semantic question has substantive political and epistemological implications. Back in the 1990s heyday of postcolonial theory, Edward W. Said described imperialism as "an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control."[3] Borrowing Pablo Mukherjee's concept, I've argued that Said's attention (and that of the anti-imperialist resistance he analyzed) to this "primacy of the geographical element" amounts to a "weak anthropocentric environmentalism."[4] Movements for environmental justice—contests over the control and valuation of nature, and over the uneven distribution of environmental benefits and burdens—haven't always used the word *environmentalism* to describe their agendas. As Joan Martínez-Alier writes in *The Environmentalism of the Poor*, "The world environmental justice movement started long ago on a hundred dates and in a hundred places all over the world."[5] In this approach, social and ecological justice are inextricably intertwined, and humans

1 Rob Nixon, "Environmentalism and Postcolonialism," in *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*, eds. Ania Loomba, Suvir Kaul, Matti Bunzl, Antoinette Burton, and Jed Esty (Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press, 2005): 233–51, esp. 235.

2 Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

3 Edward W Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 271.

4 Jennifer Wenzel, "Reading Fanon Reading Nature," *What Postcolonial Theory Doesn't Say*, eds. Ziad Elmarsafy, Anna Bernard, and Stuart Murray (Routledge, 2015): 185–201.

5 Joan Martínez-Alier, *The Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cheltenham, England: Elgar, 2002), 172.

are a part of nature, which is not to say that they are without conflicts or contradictions.

Thus, I don't agree when Iheka writes that "The quest for decolonization and national liberation trumped other considerations including questions of patriarchy and women's rights. The environment did not merit inclusion at all."[6] To be sure, questions of gender and sexuality *were* often subordinated to the project of national liberation, even if through visions of "modern" womanhood as part of the case for admittance into the family of independent nation-states: Juliana Nfah-Abbenyi, Anne McClintock, and Partha Chatterjee (among others) make distinct, yet related, arguments in this vein. Likewise, I would argue, the environment was subordinated within, *rather than excluded from*, demands for decolonization, in a specific sense of subordination. After all, what exactly was to be decolonized, or liberated? "For a colonized people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity," wrote Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*.[7] Land, territory, natural resources: these were quite literally the terrain of anticolonial struggles. (Iheka recognizes this historical dynamic later in the book when he notes the importance of the forest in the fight for land and freedom in Kenya.) One important and understudied aspect of mid-twentieth-century decolonization movements was the attempt to establish in international law the notion of permanent sovereignty over natural resources, in order to counter imperial powers' expropriations of nature, both at the dawn of colonization and at its dissolution. Nonetheless, the mode of sovereignty envisioned in this endeavor also assumed the sovereignty of humans over nature: in this sense, the environment was subordinate to the project of liberation, even if nature was the terrain of struggle. The very notion of nature *as a resource*, what Arturo Escobar calls the "coloniality of nature," was a legacy of European colonization that remains to be overthrown.[8]

This, I think, is what Iheka has in mind when he argues that the time has come for a shift from *environmental* to *ecological* justice: that nonhuman nature no longer be subordinate to human concerns, even in the name of environmentalism.[9] To that end, Iheka theorizes an "aesthetics of proximity" between humans and nonhuman nature that entails spatial contiguity, common enmeshment, and too-often unacknowledged similarity.[10] These, to my mind, are some of the strongest arguments in the book, which offer

6 Cajetan Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa: Ecological Violence, Agency, and Postcolonial Resistance in African Literature* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 9.

7 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farringdon (New York: Grove, 1968), 44.

8 Arturo Escobar, *Territories of Difference: Place, Movements, Life, Redes* (Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 121.

9 Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa*, 2, 12. This non-anthropocentrism is arguably already implicit within environmental justice, construed most broadly. In *The Environmentalism of the Poor*, Joan Martínez-Alier notes that "environmental justice" signifies both the history of social movements in the United States against environmental racism, as well as Rawlsian philosophical and ethical inquiries into "the allocation of environmental benefits among people including future generations, and between [human] people and other sentient beings" (168). For a discussion of the implications of this multifold sense of environmental justice for what we might understand as a Fanonian/Saidian "more-than-humanism," see Jennifer Wenzel, "Turning Over a New Leaf: Fanonian Humanism and Environmental Justice," in *Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities*, eds. Ursula K. Heise, Jon Christensen, and Michelle Niemann (Routledge, 2017): 165–73.

10 Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa*, 22–23.

a trenchant and inventive way to read the literary as a mode of confronting and contemplating such proximities, as well as their limits—a point to which I will return.

In terms of environmental/ecological justice, one important implication of *Naturalizing Africa* is its latent invitation to revise our understanding of Fanon's account of violence and its role in the dialectic of decolonization. The ethical and political force of Fanon's understanding of anticolonial violence—as a dialectical response to a primary, foundational act of colonial violence waged against the colonized—cannot be overstated. (Yet to historicize violence in this way is not the same thing as to "celebrate" it, as Iheka claims.)[11] The same force underwrites Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's observation about how hegemonic narratives often begin from "secondly," thereby eliding those seminal acts of violence that motivate acts of resistance; without beginning at the beginning, such acts can seem inexplicable, irrational even.[12] For Fanon, the colonized world is Manichean, a world cut in two; decolonization in *The Wretched of the Earth* is described as many things, but the book's final section gestures toward the possibility of a dialectical, decolonizing transformation "for Europe, for ourselves and humanity": a becoming-human of both the settler and his wretched creation, the native.[13]

Reading Iheka, I recognized something about this scenario that I had not been able to name before. The colonized world is not in fact Manichean, the meeting of two opposing forces. *There is, à la Sophocles, a third actor in the drama of decolonization*. Indeed, even Fanon's infamous account of the colonized town, starkly divided between settler and native zones, reveals the importance of this third term: land, nature, the (built) environment. To say that land, nature, and environment are the terrain of colonial conflict is not to posit them as inert or given: they are produced in and constitutive of struggle, not a flat or static stage upon which the "real" intrahuman action unfolds. Notice the similarity with Fanon's account of national culture, which is also produced in struggle rather than ahistorical essence or tradition. The struggle for postcolonial sovereignty as resource sovereignty is therefore a struggle for what we might think of as *national nature*—the right to dispose of resources within national territory. One need only look to Nigeria and the Niger delta to see what Fanon would call the contradictions and pitfalls of this ideal of national nature; if the idea of a "natural resource" needs to be decolonized, so does the idea of a *national* resource. With regard to the drama of decolonization envisioned by Fanon, to the extent that violence is its fundamental mode of relation, the third term in the drama (land, nature, environment) can also be the target or object of such violence, and possibly also its agent.

What sparked this insight for me was Iheka's recurrent caution about the unintended costs of anticolonial and other struggles, which can themselves be complicit in environmental harm. Writing about Niger delta militancy in postcolonial Nigeria, Iheka aims to "show the limitations of violence as a mode of resistance in the Delta," when tactics like sabotage or illicit bunkering result in oil spilling onto land and water: "the act of resistance becomes complicit in the same environmental degradation it

11 Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa*, 85.
12 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "Memoire," *Curse of the Black Gold: 50 Years of Oil in the Niger Delta*, ed. Michael Watts (Brooklyn: powerHouse, 2008): 102–03, esp. 102.
13 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 316.

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seeks to subvert."[14] Iheka rightly notes that the proliferation of such tactics in the Niger delta in the past two decades has been invoked by oil companies as an alibi to explain away the harm caused by their everyday operations. And yet, I was left wondering about the implications of Iheka's valid concern. Does it matter if we understand such resistance within that Fanonian dialectic, expanded to include the third term of nonhuman nature? How do we calibrate the environmental harm of resistance with the foundational violence perpetrated by companies and the petro-state against land, water, and people? Without such calibration of that complicity, are we simply beginning the narrative at "secondly"?

Another important thread in *Naturalizing Africa* is its engagement with thinkers such as Stacy Alaimo, Jane Bennett, Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, and Bruno Latour on questions of matter and the imbrications of human bodies and actions with more-than-human nature: Iheka ramifies his provocative "aesthetics of proximity" in conversation with such figures. In the context of African literary studies, there's something refreshing about Iheka's invocations of "theory" in these varied new materialist and multispecies guises, not least because he seems (at first) untroubled about questions of provenance: whether "Western" theory can ever be adequate as a rubric for making sense of African literature or experience, a topic of much concern in decades past. Yet as I was reading, I found myself wanting Iheka to be *more* anxious about some of these ideas. I wanted him not to take Bennett at her word that attending to how agency is distributed across human and nonhuman entities does not come at the cost of grappling with human and corporate culpability, or with intrahuman exploitation across axes of race, class, and gender. Iheka takes up the mantra that closes many chapters of Bennett's *Vibrant Matter*, that attending to these nonhuman forces will somehow engender a politics less harmful to the environment—a desideratum that Iheka names "sustainability."[15] But I wanted him to wonder about what "sustainability" means and where it comes from as a supposed environmental ideal: sustainability of what, for whom? (Ditto the notion of the "resource curse,"[16] which blames corruption and poor governance in resource-rich societies on the resource, rather than the social relations that surround its extraction and consumption, thereby letting multinational corporations and affluent consumers off the hook.)

Ultimately, Iheka's engagement with new materialist and posthumanist thought is itself somewhat dialectical, or at least disappointed; much of his initial enthusiasm gives way across the chapters to a sense of wariness. He describes as "disturbing" the ascendancy of posthumanist thought at a moment when Africans and other formerly colonized peoples have not fully won the struggle to be recognized as human[17]—an observation which echoes that made by Barbara Christian in the late 1980s, that the metaphysical language of high theory assumed its priestly status in literary studies "just when the literatures of people of color, of black women, of Latin Americans, of Africans began to move to 'the center.'"[18] Iheka rightly observes the profound irony that the recent materialist turn has contemplated the agency and vitality of matter in

14 Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa*, 86, 4.
15 Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa*, 8, 15, 60.
16 Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa*, 93.
17 Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa*, 160.
18 Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," *Cultural Critique* 6 (1987): 51–63, 55.

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part by embracing "indigenous cosmologies" and modes of knowing that were "once dismissed as evidence of primitive thinking";[19] the implication is that now "Western" theory is not so Western after all. To that end, Iheka invokes Harry Garuba's "Explorations in Animist Materialism: Reading/Writing African Literature, Culture and Society"—an important 2003 essay that I would dub *seminal*, except that the questions it provokes about the relationship between cosmology/ontology and literary representation remain largely unresolved.

Iheka's "aesthetics of proximity" broaches some of these questions, which are, to my mind, among the most interesting implications of the environmental humanities. How are our assumptions about the conventions of literary realism challenged by newly ascendant understandings of what nature, matter, or the "real" is? Iheka's readings of Nuruddin Farah's novels *Secrets* and *Crossbones* and Patrice Nganang's *Dog Days* are powerful not least because Iheka considers how narration, focalization, and other aspects of *authorial* agency are able to harness the capacities of the literary in order to contemplate nonhuman agency. Here Ikeha bracingly uses African novels to expand, complicate, and challenge the speculations of his new materialist theorist-interlocutors.

Elsewhere, though, his treatment of these questions is less incisive. He rightly notes that African magical (or animist) realist texts are well suited to this kind of inquiry because they are "constituted by multispecies presences, human and nonhuman, visible and invisible, that [show] the limit of the human person and his or her imbrication with various nonhuman forces."[20] Yet I found Iheka's readings of Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* and Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* insufficiently attentive to that very *variety* of nonhuman forces and their literary and ontological implications. Depending on your views about such things, the *flattening* tendency of the recent thinking on matter—its refusal to privilege one kind of being over others—is either its edge and appeal or its limitation and cost. There is a related kind of flattening at work in Iheka's account of these texts, which skirts the relationship between, on the one hand, what environmental humanities scholars have come to describe as "more-than-human nature," and on the other, the *supernatural*, which we might provisionally and inadequately understand as "more-than-natural nature." This is the vexed literary and ontological terrain that I've tried to think through in "Petro-Magic-Realism: Towards a Political Ecology of Nigerian Literature" (2006) and "Petro-Magic-Realism Revisited" (2014), essays that consider how Tutuola, Okri, and other Nigerian writers draw upon Yoruba narrative traditions where "the bush" is peopled by spirits and strange creatures in order to depict the phantasmagoric and all-too-real effects of petroleum extraction in the Niger delta. I'd be keen to know what Iheka thinks about these arguments, but they aren't cited in his monograph.[21] Moreover, Iheka's disposition against human injustice and toward the environment leads him to underestimate the potential *malevolence* of spirits in these

19 Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa*, 59–60.

20 Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa*, 16–17.

21 Ranging far beyond the immediate context of Iheka's *Naturalizing Africa* to the conventions of scholarship more broadly, one systemic/structural problem with claims that attention to x, y, or z is "belated" (and which the work at hand promises to remedy) is precisely the politics of citation and the acknowledgement (or, more often, disregard) of previous work that has in fact been done.

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texts—a major source of the terror that they can evoke for readers, and sometimes a catalyst of what might be described as environmental crisis.

I don't think this flattening in *Naturalizing Africa* derives only from the question of what matter is; it also derives from the question of what literature is. In later chapters of Iheka's book, I sensed a different kind of subordination at work: that of the literary text, which often felt subordinate either to "the real" (to nature, to history) or to theory. The chapter on the Niger delta novels offers a compelling rereading of Gabriel Okara's *The Voice*, yet the chapter's larger effort to periodize and trace three historical stages of environmental harm in the Niger delta over three novels published in 1964, 1993, and 2006 rests on the strange assumption that literary history serves to *document* environmental history and to offer *evidence* of environmental harm, without regard for such literary matters as form, genre, setting, style, tone, rhetorical address, and so forth. "Since texts are products of a time and place, we can surmise that this literary imaginary [in an early passage in *The Voice*] seems untroubled by the prospect of ecological degradation in the early 1960s Nigeria when the novel was set," Iheka notes.[22] He identifies Okara's novel with an "incubation period"[23] of oil-induced environmental degradation without grappling with *whether* and *how* developments in the world outside a novel come to *register* (to borrow a useful term from the Warwick Research Collective) in the novel's pages, nor how one passage in a novel might stand in conversation or ironic tension with other aspects of it. The narrator's concluding observation in *The Voice*, "the river flowed smoothly over as if nothing had happened," only reinforces the ominous portent latent in the early passage Iheka cites as evidence of unconcern ("everything looks good," Iheka writes), whose lyrical account and idyllic tone arguably *also* describe the river as if nothing is happening, thereby calling attention to what may be happening beneath the surface or beyond the diegetic frame.[24] It's precisely that tricky relay (and gap) between what's happening on the page and what's happening in the world that makes literature and engaged literary criticism something other than a juridically admissible accounting of violation. Similarly, by focusing so much of his argumentative attention on aspects of novels that "confirm" Timothy Morton's ideas about ecological thought (as if Morton harbors any doubt), Iheka severely subordinates the literary to the theoretical, thereby missing an opportunity to model what environmental approaches to the study of African literature might contribute to a widespread sense of urgency and crisis and how they might complicate, undo, or displace accounts like Morton's.

That sense of crisis—and the need to deprovincialize what has too often been the same old, default Western ethnocentric understanding of just what the crisis is and where it came from—make *Naturalizing Africa* a timely and important book indeed. One hopes that its most powerful insights (as well as its oversights) create openings for scholars—both those new to the conversation, and those already in it—to expand our understanding of the capacity of literature, particularly African literature, to help readers make sense of and confront the more-than-human, threatened-by-humans worlds they inhabit.

22 Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa*, 99.
23 Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa*, 101.
24 Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa*, 98, 96.

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