Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry, 6(2), pp 298–299 April 2019.
 doi:10.1017/pli.2018.41

Response to Cajetan Iheka's *Naturalizing Africa*

Naturalizing Africa: Ecological Violence, Agency, and Postcolonial Resistance in African Literature
By CAJETAN IHEKA
Cambridge University Press, 2018, 225 pp.
doi:10.1017/pli.2018.41

Over the past several years, postcolonial ecocriticism has come to face two major challenges, both of which can also be seen as major opportunities. The first is the rise of environmental humanities, one of the effects of whose cross-disciplinary remit has been to shake the literary foundations of ecocriticism while challenging postcolonial criticism, which was perhaps always keener to do this, to move across traditional disciplinary boundaries as well. The second is the astonishing emergence of a cluster of critical-theoretical approaches that are loosely bracketed under the label of the "new materialism"—astonishing not because of the power or outlandishness of their claims but because of the speed with which they have been adopted as a new orthodoxy in ecocritical, if not necessarily postcolonial, thought. As Peta Hinton, Tara Mehrabi, and Josef Barba have recently suggested in "New Materialisms/New Colonialisms," post-colonial and new materialist theories are strange bedfellows in some respects, with each drawing attention to insufficiencies in the other, but each also holding the possibility of adding to the other: "against this [contentious] backdrop," the authors argue, "the question arises of how postcolonial theory can remain loyal to its [humanist] roots while at the same time taking into account various forms of material and nonhuman agency that new materialisms propose."

Cajetan Iheka's important new book *Naturalizing Africa* takes up this task, its primary aim being to "investigate the ways [contemporary] African literary expressive cultures articulate the coexistence and imbrication of human and nonhuman lives" (23). Turning his back on those predominantly allegorical framings of human-animal relations that he sees as having previously dominated African literary criticism, Iheka argues instead for a nuanced appreciation of human/nonhuman interconnectivity and "multispecies entanglement" (23) that might allow for a more inclusive—properly ecological—understanding of Africa's multiple colonial legacies and their more recent neocolonial manifestations, evidence of which he traces in a carefully considered selection of well-known and relatively unfamiliar Anglophone African literary texts. These texts—all of them novels—are innovatively read by using a combination of postcolonial and new materialist approaches, with the by now familiar lexicon of the former ("freedom," "resistance," "agency") being complemented and complicated by the instantly axiomatic neologisms of the latter ("transcorporeality," "interspecies relationality," "distributed agency," "the ecological thought").

At its best, this bifocal lens produces brilliantly mirrored thoughts that significantly extend our understandings of Yoruba fable (chapter 1), Somali war narrative (chapter 2), Niger delta environmentalist jeremiad (chapter 3), and pan-African resistance literature (chapter 4). There are problems, though, that tend to mount in later chapters. Probably the most serious of these is Iheka's tendency to take postcolonial and, especially, new materialist thinkers on trust, to the extent that these latter emerge almost as modern-day guru figures (a status that some of them, for example, Timothy Morton, arguably cultivate, but that others, such as Jane Bennett or Stacy Alaimo, certainly do not). Iheka thus misses a great opportunity to use postcolonial theory to *critique* new materialism and vice versa, while one wonders at times whether nonhuman animals, both material and symbolic, are effectively being coopted into a shared, "multispecies" world. Other problems are related to this, such as the reluctance to define or expand upon terms (Morton's "strange strangers," Alaimo's "transcorporeality," etc.); the conflation of very different writers and thinkers; the alternating rejection and tacit acceptance of victim rhetoric, transposed onto the sacrificial figure of the suffering animal; and the use—hugely ironic in this context—of African literature as raw material for Western theory, with indigenous or vernacular theory playing at best a secondary or supplementary role.

Admittedly some of the theory works well, but some of it seems ill-suited to the context of anticolonial struggle—a mismatch at its most apparent in the final chapter, where a lively discussion of grassroots resistance seems to require the shift to a different critical vocabulary entirely that has more in keeping with political ecology than new materialism. This shift is then maintained in the epilogue, the main aim of which is to rehabilitate the humanist approach that appears to have been jettisoned elsewhere. Iheka runs the risk of contradicting himself here, first by seeming to endorse Braidotti's "posthuman subjectivity" (159), only to find himself a page later calling critical attention to the "posthuman lure" (160). As he powerfully says on the same page, "posthumanism is gaining currency at a time when Africans and other formerly colonized people are beginning to see the fruits of their struggle for human rights" (160). Precisely—which makes me wonder why his book didn't *start* with this, taking issue in the process with some of the very "new materialists" who also like to see themselves as "posthumanists" *avant la lettre*.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2018.41 Published online by Cambridge University Press