
Byron Caminero-Santangelo. *Different Shades of Green: African Literature, Environmental Justice and Political Ecology*. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2014. Pp. x, 214. US\$27.50.

Ecocriticism has always had an ambivalent relationship to African literature. As Byron Caminero-Santangelo suggests in *Different Shades of Green: African Literature, Environmental Justice and Political Ecology*, the African continent has long been regarded as lacking environmental traditions—a prejudice that colors the reception of many African texts. Within postcolonial ecocriticism,

careful attention to African writers is hard to find, while ecocriticism's place within African literary studies is marginal at best. *Different Shades of Green* thus sets out to not only show the importance of ecocriticism to African literary studies but also demonstrate how the study of African literature can help us re-examine key assumptions about the nature of both African environmentalism and African literary texts.

As Caminero-Santangelo explains, an emphasis on the social and political aspects of environmental problems, rather than on "nature" itself, distinguishes African environmental literature. "African environmental writing," he writes, "tends to prioritize social justice; lived environments; livelihoods; and/or the relationships among environmental practice, representations of nature, power, and privilege" (7). Many of the "environmental" texts Caminero-Santangelo explores are therefore less overtly concerned with the environment than one might expect—Wangarii Maathai and Ken Saro-Wiwa figure prominently here, but so do many figures less known to ecocriticism like Okot p'Bitek, Camara Laye, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Chinua Achebe. If the inclusion of such writers seems unorthodox, that is precisely the point. By arguing for the ecocritical significance of the foregoing authors, Caminero-Santangelo intends to show how "African literature can challenge dominant Western assumptions regarding African environments and environmentalism" and to "interrogate widely accepted definitions of environmental writing and the underlying constructions of nature and conservation embedded in them" (4).

Different Shades of Green therefore expands the African environmental canon and in many respects the boundaries of ecocriticism itself. For Caminero-Santangelo, ecocriticism in African literature is not interested primarily in beautiful landscapes and charismatic megafauna but the social and political contexts that make up the environments with which his texts are concerned. However, *Different Shades of Green* is as much about the practice of ecocriticism in African literary studies as about new ecocritical readings of African texts. The notion of "postcolonial regional particularism" becomes important for Caminero-Santangelo. As he explains,

[a] regional focus need not result in a provincializing vision, a narrowing of concerns, or its own suppression of difference at smaller scales. While emphasizing regional alterity that cannot be subsumed by a more universal imperial or postcolonial condition, . . . *postcolonial regional particularism* still challenges imperial discourse's suppression of global entanglement in the representation of difference. (9; emphasis in original)

Different Shades of Green thus critiques imperialism from the perspective of African literary and environmental studies in order to show how attention to African texts and contexts can help us think about environmental problems on both local and global scales. Indeed, Caminero-Santangelo is concerned with not only how African texts “[bring] the local and the global together but also . . . how ‘each interrupts and distorts the other’” (15).

Caminero-Santangelo’s focus on sub-Saharan Africa thus does not preclude attention to the global forces that structure the environmental problems at issue throughout the book. To the contrary, his regional-particularist approach enables careful attention to the ways local texts and contexts both reflect and reimagine ongoing processes across varied levels of analysis—hence the book’s emphasis on contrapuntal dialogue among literary texts and between such texts and a wide range of scholarship in political ecology and environmental justice. While Caminero-Santangelo is certainly interested in exploring how African texts represent the politics of environmental justice, he also attempts to show how such texts can change the way we think about environmental justice and political ecology more generally. Noting that there is no useful framework for thinking about political and environmental problems across geographic scale, Caminero-Santangelo suggests that “[l]iterary texts and investigations of relationships among them can serve as important means to confront this conceptual and imaginative challenge” (34). And as he goes on to explain, the questions the book’s texts explore are remarkably similar to those addressed by scholars of political ecology and environmental justice more broadly (34). In other words, African environmental writing is not an adjunct of global discourses about environmental justice and political ecology—it should be read as contributing to these projects as well.

This last point is undoubtedly where *Different Shades of Green* is most exciting and ambitious, and I applaud the care with which Caminero-Santangelo positions African literary texts as active contributors to the discourses he considers. However, the payoff of the book’s investment in contrapuntal dialogue can sometimes be hard to see. Its focus on such an approach is motivated in part out of concerns over “analytic closure” (78) or the construction of a totalizing account of what literary and environmental studies in Africa should be. But for all of Caminero-Santangelo’s care in this regard, the archive that the book assembles remains almost entirely rural in its settings and largely realist in its modes of representation, thus reiterating the rather narrow analytic framework that has long defined ecocriticism as a whole—sub-Saharan Africa’s abundant urban literatures remain unexamined and the ascendant genre of African science fiction is left entirely aside. Despite the book’s emphasis on the potential stakes of contrapuntal dialogue between

literary texts and scholarship in political ecology and environmental justice, it is not always clear how Caminero-Santangelo's analyses contribute meaningfully to thinking about environmental problems in other fields. Though he suggests, as mentioned above, that literature can provide a way of conceiving of environmental problems across scale, the payoff of such inquires are left for other scholars to explore. That *Different Shades of Green* does not quite live up to its loftier ambitions is not, however, a sign that its project fails as a whole. Much to the contrary, an account of ecocriticism and African literature is sorely needed, and Caminero-Santangelo's book certainly helps to fill a gap in postcolonial ecocriticism. Caminero-Santangelo is an astute critic, and *Different Shades of Green* will be required reading for ecocritics—postcolonial and otherwise—for many years to come.

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