

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

Slow Violence

Literary and postcolonial studies have ignored the environmentalism that often only the poor can see

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JUNE 26, 2011



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Members of the Kayapo people protest in Brazil's capital against the recently approved Belo Monte Dam, which will displace some 40,000 mostly indigenous people. Dams have already driven more than a million poor Brazilians off their land.

Environmentalists face a fundamental challenge: How can we devise arresting stories, images, and symbols that capture the pervasive but elusive effects of what I call “slow violence”? Climate change, the thawing cryosphere, toxic drift, deforestation, the radioactive aftermaths of wars, oil spills, acidifying oceans, and a host of other slowly unfolding environmental crises confront us with formidable representational obstacles that hinder efforts to mobilize for change.

We are accustomed to conceiving violence as immediate and explosive, erupting into instant, concentrated visibility. But we need to revisit our assumptions and consider the relative invisibility of slow violence. I mean a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous but instead incremental, whose calamitous repercussions are

postponed for years or decades or centuries. I want, then, to complicate conventional perceptions of violence as a highly visible act that is newsworthy because it is focused around an event, bounded by time, and aimed at a specific body or bodies.

Emphasizing the temporal dispersion of slow violence can change the way we perceive and respond to a variety of social crises, like domestic abuse or post-traumatic stress, but it is particularly pertinent to the strategic challenges of environmental calamities.

Politically and emotionally, different kinds of disaster possess unequal heft. Falling bodies, burning towers, exploding heads, avalanches, tornadoes, volcanoes—they all have a visceral, page-turning potency that tales of slow violence cannot match. Stories of toxic buildup, massing greenhouse gases, and accelerated species loss because of ravaged habitats may all be cataclysmic, but they are scientifically convoluted cataclysms in which casualties are postponed, often for generations. How, in an age when the news media venerate the spectacular, when public policy and electoral campaigns are shaped around perceived immediate need, can we convert into image and narrative those disasters that are slow-moving and long in the making, anonymous, starring nobody, attritional and of indifferent interest to our image-driven world? How can we turn the long emergencies of slow violence into stories striking enough to rouse public sentiment and warrant political intervention, these emergencies whose repercussions have given rise to some of the most serious threats of our time?

The long dyings—the staggered and staggeringly discounted casualties, both human and ecological—are often not just incremental but exponential, operating as major threat multipliers. They can spur long-term, proliferating conflicts that arise from desperation as the conditions for sustaining life are degraded in ways that the corporate media seldom discuss. One hundred million unexploded land mines lie inches beneath our planet's skin, from wars officially concluded decades ago. Whether in Cambodia, Laos, Somalia, or Angola, those still-active mines have made vast tracts of precious agricultural land and pastures no-go zones, further stressing oversubscribed resources and compounding malnutrition.

To confront slow violence is to take up, in all its temporal complexity, the politics of the visible and the invisible. That requires that we think through the ways that environmental-justice movements strategize to shift the balance of visibility, pushing back against the forces of temporal inattention that exacerbate injustices of class, gender, race, and region. For if slow violence is typically underrepresented in the media, such underrepresentation is exacerbated whenever (as typically happens) it is the poor who become its frontline victims, above all the poor in the Southern Hemisphere. Impoverished societies located mainly in the global South often have lax or unenforced environmental regulations, allowing transnational corporations (often in partnership with autocratic regimes) the liberty to exploit resources without redress. Thus, for example, Texaco's oil drilling in Ecuador was not subject to the kinds of regulatory constraints the company would have confronted in America, a point highlighted by the Ecuadorean environmental-justice movement, *Acción Ecológica*.

Our temporal bias toward spectacular violence exacerbates the vulnerability of ecosystems treated as disposable by capitalism, while simultaneously intensifying the vulnerability of those whom the human-rights activist Kevin Bales has called "disposable people." Earlier this month, Brazil gave the green light to the gargantuan Belo Monte Dam, despite opposition from 20 leading Brazilian scientific societies and the nation's Movement of Dam-Affected People. Dams have driven more than over a million poor Brazilians off their land; Belo Monte will further displace an estimated 40,000 mostly indigenous people, while flooding 200 square miles of the forests and clearings on which they have depended. It is against such conjoined ecological and human disposability that we have witnessed, again and again, a resurgent environmentalism of the poor.

Alongside that activism, a diverse group of writer-activists is espousing the causes of the environmentally dispossessed. These writers are geographically wide ranging and work in a variety of forms—novels, poetry, essays, memoirs, theater, blogs. Figures like Wangari Maathai, Indra Sinha, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Abdul Rahman Munif, Njabulo S.

Ndebele, Nadine Gordimer, Jamaica Kincaid, Arundhati Roy, and June Jordan have recorded the long-term inhabited impact of corrosive transnational forces, including petro-imperialism, the megadam industry, the practice of shipping rich nations' toxins (like e-waste) to poor nations' dumping grounds, tourism that threatens indigenous peoples, conservation practices that drive people off their historic lands, environmental deregulation for commercial or military demands, and much more.

The strategies these writers adopt are as varied as their concerns. In *Animal's People* (Simon & Schuster, 2008), Sinha remodels the picaresque novel to portray life in a fictional version of Bhopal 20 years after the disaster there. His scurrilous, scheming narrator, Animal, pours out lively, gritty, street-level stories about the urban underclass that inhabits the interminable aftermath, in a city where the poisons released by the chemical explosion still course through the aquifers, the food chain, and the people's genes. By contrast, Maathai's memoir, *Unbowed* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), offers an animated account of the successful struggle mounted by Kenyan women against illicit deforestation, a struggle that involved 100,000 activists who planted 30 million trees. They also planted the seeds of peace, creating a vibrant civil-rights movement that linked environmental rights to women's rights, freedom of expression, and educational access.

Some writers have helped instigate movements for environmental justice. Saro-Wiwa, for example, was one of the founders of Nigeria's Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People; Maathai won the Nobel Peace Prize for her work starting the Green Belt Movement. Others, like Roy and Sinha, have aligned themselves with pre-existing groups like India's Save the Narmada Movement and the Bhopal survivors' movement—thereby giving imaginative definition to the issues at stake while enhancing the international visibility of their causes. None of these writers, however, are committed to some narrow ideology, but are simply sorrowed or enraged by injustices they believe in some modest way they can help expose, silences they can help dismantle through testimonial protest, rhetorical creativity, and by advancing counterhistories

in the face of formidable odds. Most are restless, versatile writers ready to pit their energies against what Edward Said called “the normalized quiet of unseen power.”

Engaging with writers who give imaginative definition to the slow violence inflicted in the global South can help us reshape the conceptual priorities that animate the environmental humanities. Literary studies has been a major force in the greening of the humanities, but since the growth of environmental literary studies as a field in the mid-1990s, it has suffered from an Americanist bias—in the kinds of authors studied and, most important, in the perception of what counts as environmental writing.

Of particular significance here is the way environmental literary studies and postcolonial studies have developed largely along parallel lines. The two fields have emerged as among the most dynamic areas in literary studies, yet their relationship has been, until very recently, dominated by reciprocal indifference or mistrust. Unlike some movements that have come and gone within literary studies (reader-response theory, say, or deconstruction), environmental and postcolonial studies have both exhibited an often-activist dimension that connects their priorities to movements for social change. Yet, for the most part, a broad silence has characterized environmentalists’ stance toward postcolonial literature and theory while postcolonial critics have typically been no less silent on the subject of environmental literature. Why? And what kinds of intellectual efforts might deepen an overdue dialogue that is just now belatedly starting to emerge?

In other areas of the humanities and social sciences—notably environmental history, cultural geography, and cultural anthropology—a substantial body of work arose much earlier in the borderlands between postcolonial and environmental studies, work that recognized, among other things, the political and cultural significance of the environmentalism of the poor. One thinks, for example, of *Liberation Ecologies* (Routledge, 1996), edited by the geographers Richard Peet and Michael Watts; *The Varieties of Environmentalism*, by the sociologist Ramachandra Guha and the economist Joan Martinez-Alier; and *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*, by

the anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing. Yet within literary studies, such crossover work has long been inhibited by a widespread assumption that the subjects and methodologies of the two fields are divergent, even incompatible, not least in their visions of what counts as political.

Let me ground this divergence in two simultaneous events. In October 1995, *The New York Times* Sunday Magazine featured a story by the literary critic Jay Parini entitled “The Greening of the Humanities.” Parini described the rise to prominence of environmentalism in the humanities, especially in literature departments. At the end of the essay, he named 17 writers and critics whose work was central to the environmental-studies boom. Something struck me as odd about the list: All 17 were American.

The unselfconscious parochialism was disturbing, not least because at that time I was involved in the campaign to release Ken Saro-Wiwa, the Ogoni author who was being held prisoner without trial for his environmental and human-rights activism in Nigeria. Two weeks after Parini’s article appeared, the regime of Gen. Sani Abacha executed Saro-Wiwa after a military tribunal denied him a fair trial, making him Africa’s most visible environmental martyr. Here was a writer—a novelist, poet, memoirist, and essayist—who had died fighting the attritional ruination of his Ogoni people’s farmland and fishing waters by European and American oil conglomerates in cahoots with a despotic African regime. Yet it was apparent that Saro-Wiwa’s writings were unlikely to find a home in the kind of environmental literary lineage outlined by Parini.

The more ecocriticism I read, the more my impression was confirmed. I encountered some intellectually transforming books, but they tended to canonize the same self-selecting genealogy of American authors: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Edward Abbey, Annie Dillard, Terry Tempest Williams, Wendell Berry, Gary Snyder. All were authors of influence and accomplishment, yet all were drawn from within the boundaries of a single nation.

Environmental literary anthologies, Web sites for college courses, conferences, and special issues on ecocriticism revealed similar patterns.

Literary environmentalism was developing, de facto, as an offshoot of American studies. Moreover, the environmental-justice movement, the branch of American environmentalism that held the greatest potential for connecting outwards internationally—to issues of slow violence, the environmentalism of the poor, race, and empire—remained marginal to the dominant environmentalism that was becoming institutionalized through the greening of the humanities.

The resulting national self-enclosure seemed peculiar: One might surely have expected environmentalism to be more, not less, transnational than other fields of literary inquiry. It was unfortunate that a writer like Saro-Wiwa, who had long protested what he termed the gradual “ecological genocide” of his people, could find no place in the environmental canon. Was this because he was an African? Was it because his writings revealed no special debt to Thoreau, to the wilderness tradition, or to Jeffersonian agrarianism? Saro-Wiwa’s writings were animated instead by the fraught relations among ethnicity, pollution, and minority rights and by the equally fraught relations among local, national, and global politics.

Some of the violence he sought to expose was direct and at gunpoint, but much of it was incremental, oblique, and slow moving. Remarkably, the Niger delta has suffered the equivalent of an *Exxon Valdez*-size oil spill every year for nearly half a century, yet until Saro-Wiwa’s rise to prominence, that attritional calamity had attracted almost no international media attention.

Saro-Wiwa’s invisibility in the United States was all the more telling given the role that America played in his emergence as an environmental writer. America buys nearly half of Nigeria’s oil, and human-rights groups point to Chevron as a significant Ogoni-land polluter. More affirmatively, it was on a trip to Colorado that Saro-Wiwa witnessed a successful environmental campaign to stop corporate logging. That experience

contributed to his decision to mobilize international opinion by voicing his people's claims not just in the language of human rights but in environmental terms as well. Yet it was clear from the prevailing ecocritical perspective in literary studies that someone like Saro-Wiwa—whose environmentalism was at once profoundly local and profoundly transnational—would be bracketed as an African, the kind of writer best left to the postcolonialists.

Postcolonial literary critics, however, had shown scant interest in environmental concerns, regarding them (explicitly or implicitly) as at best irrelevant and elitist, at worst as sullied by “green imperialism.” Saro-Wiwa's distinctive attempt to fuse environmental and minority rights, I realized, was unlikely to achieve much of a hearing in either camp. Around the time Saro-Wiwa was executed, the pre-eminent voice of postcolonial studies, Said, in a conversation with me in his office at Columbia University, dismissed environmentalism as “the indulgence of spoiled tree huggers who lack a proper cause.” The American transcendentalist literature that dominated the environmental literary canon seemed antithetical to the postcolonial preoccupation with transnational and subaltern histories.

In the decade and a half since Saro-Wiwa's execution, we have witnessed enormous changes in global perceptions of environmentalism—as well as changes in the way environmentalism is being taught and studied in the humanities. Whereas, in the global South, environmental discourse was once typically regarded as a neocolonial, Western imposition inimical to the resource priorities of the poor, such attitudes have been tempered by the gathering visibility of environmental-justice movements that have pushed back against an antihuman environmentalism that too often sought to impose green agendas dominated by rich nations and Western NGO's. We see that shift in Amitav Ghosh's novel, *The Hungry Tide*, set in the mangrove forests of the Ganges delta. Ghosh, an Indian-Bengali author, exposes the disastrous fallout of metropolitan types trying to impose their narrow views of what counts as environmentalism (Save the Tiger) without regard for the people who must coexist with tigers within the mangrove ecosystem. Crucially, the book does not depict those

people as anti-environmental, but as having their own environmental priorities—tied to their, and the forest's, survival.

Western activists are also now more prone to recognize, engage, and learn from marginalized communities that rise up to defend their resources. Some of the credit for that must go to the writer-activists, journalists, and documentary filmmakers who have helped bring news of those struggles to international audiences and, in the process, have underscored the link between social and environmental justice. Indeed, I believe that the fate of the environment—and, more decisively, the character of the biosphere itself—will be shaped significantly in decades to come by the relationship between the environmentalisms of the rich and poor, by what Guha and Martinez-Alier have called “full stomach” and “empty belly” environmentalism.

These changes are also being felt in the classroom. Across a range of intellectual fronts, we are witnessing some heartening initiatives that are challenging the dominant conceptions of what it might mean to green the humanities.

This past year, the first two anthologies to bring postcolonial and environmental studies into the conversation have appeared: Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley's *Postcolonial Ecologies* and Alex Hunt and Bonnie Roos's *Postcolonial Green*. Upamanya Pablo's superb study of Indian fiction, *Postcolonial Environment: Nature, Culture and the Contemporary Indian Novel in English*, also appeared in 2010, and the first anthology of African environmental scholarship (bridging the humanities and social sciences) will be published by Ohio University Press in September—Byron Caminero-Santangelo and Garth Myers's *Environment at the Margins*.

The belated engagement between environmental and postcolonial literary studies is part of a series of energetic exchanges, two of which, in particular, warrant mentioning. First, the transnational turn in American studies, whether hemispheric or more broadly global, is achieving methodological and curricular authority. Such work, while not wholly new, is creating an intellectual climate within American studies in

which questions of empire, globalization, and transnational structures of power and resistance are moving front and center. That has clear environmental repercussions: It has the potential to shift the intellectual centers of gravity away from the American exceptionalist tendencies of wilderness literature and Jeffersonian agrarianism and toward more diverse environmental approaches that are, crucially, more compatible with the impulses animating environmental-justice movements worldwide.

A second, related change in the intellectual climate of the environmental humanities is emerging within American Indian studies. The field has, by now, a well-established history of ecocritical engagement. What is novel, however, is the gathering interest among scholars of native literatures in postcolonial studies as a productive interlocutor. This turn becomes a second way of reshaping American studies by advancing comparative approaches to settler colonialism, land rights, environmental racism, resource conflicts, and the transnational circuits of toxicity while drawing on (and reconfiguring) postcolonial studies. Here, analyses of slow violence—and the oppositional movements and literatures that have arisen in response to it—can provide significant political and intellectual common ground between the two fields.

These gathering tendencies in postcolonial, American, and native studies will help advance a more historically answerable and geographically expansive sense of what constitutes our environment—and which literary works we entrust to voice its parameters. For all the recent progress toward that goal, it remains a continuing, ambitious, and crucial task, not least because, for the foreseeable future, literature departments are likely to remain influential players in the greening of the humanities.

To reconfigure the environmental humanities involves acknowledging, among other things, how writer-activists in the Southern Hemisphere are giving imaginative definition to catastrophes that often remain imperceptible to the senses, catastrophes that unfold across a time span that exceeds the instance of observation or even the life of the human observer. In a world permeated by insidious, unspectacular violence,

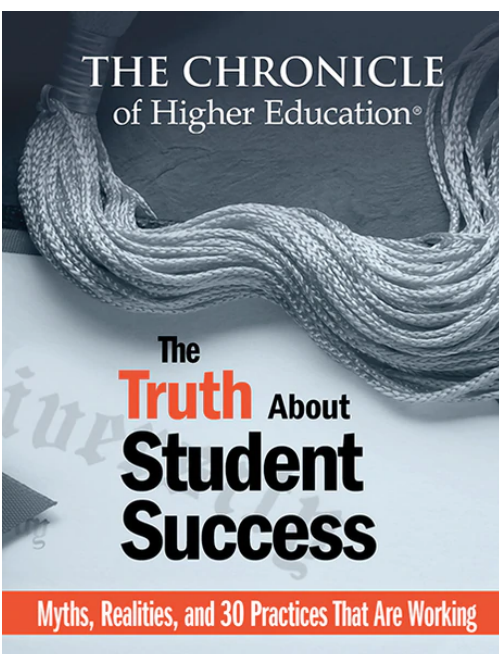
imaginative writing can make the unapparent appear, rendering it tangible by humanizing drawn-out calamities inaccessible to the immediate senses.

Writer-activists can thus help challenge media-reinforced assumptions about violence. They can work within a broad coalition to advance environmental justice. And they can draw on the strategic energies—and empower—more-traditional activist constituencies: indigenous, labor, and student groups, progressive scientists, and campaigners for human rights, women’s rights, and civil liberties, as well as organized opponents of unchecked globalization. In so doing, they will serve as a resource of hope in the larger battle to stave off, or at least retard, the slow violence inflicted by globalizing forces.

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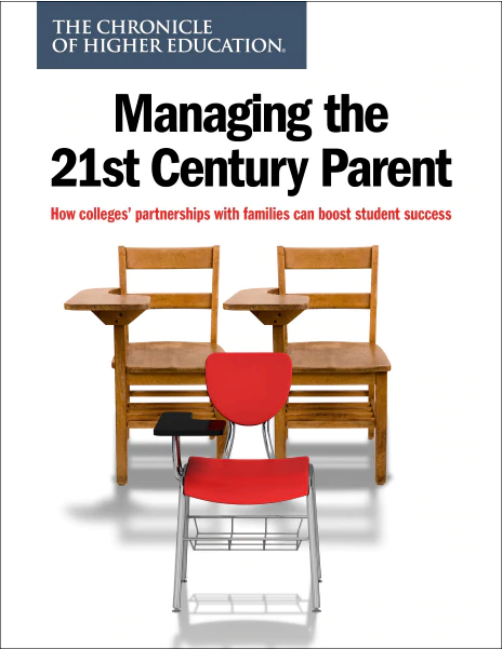
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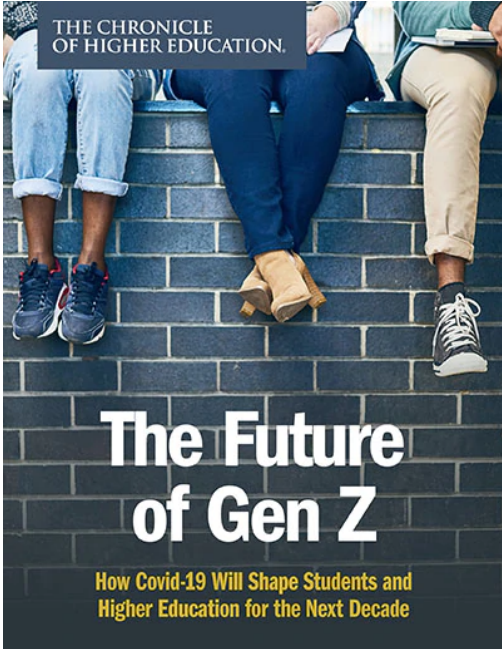


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