

Post/Colonial Environments

Annual Conference of the Association for Anglophone Postcolonial Studies (GAPS)

University of Zurich, Switzerland,

Thursday, 9 May, to Saturday, 11 May 2024

In *Empire and Environment* (2007), historians William Beinart and Lotte Hughes state that “European imperialism was [...] inseparable from the history of global environmental change.” Adopting a world-systems perspective, they understand imperialism in terms of a continuously moving “commodity frontier,” whereby new lands and their resources were incorporated into an ever-growing – and, one might add, ever more unsustainable – capitalist economy. This process not only involved material practices, such as the large-scale extraction of raw materials and the enforcement of new ways of managing the land; it also entailed the imposition of modes of knowing and seeing the non-human world. Under imperial rule, as Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin write in *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* (2010), the colonized populations were “forced or coopted over time into western views of the environment.” Both forms of hegemony persist in the present day. The 2024 GAPS Conference aims to explore literary, critical, activist, and other cultural engagements with these continuing forms of ecological domination and oppression – as well as resistance to them.

In doing so, the conference builds and expands upon existing research that brings together post-colonial studies and ecocriticism, two fields that have only recently begun to collaborate more closely. Indeed, as late as 2005, Robert Nixon diagnosed a relationship of “reciprocal indifference or mistrust” between postcolonial critics on the one hand and environmentalists on the other. Five years later, however, Huggan and Tiffin offered a decidedly more optimistic assessment of the connections between the two scholarly camps. In *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, they speak (somewhat self-referentially) of a “burgeoning alliance between postcolonial and environmental studies.” Nonetheless, not everything about the current wave of postcolonial ecocriticism is new, nor should the “greening” of post-colonialism be attributed solely to the influence of ecocriticism. Important elements of it are already present in the anticolonial manifestoes of the post-war years that form the historical and theoretical basis of postcolonial studies, as Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee points out in *Postcolonial Environments* (2010). Thus, Aimé Césaire’s landmark *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950) counts the Indigenous relationship to the environment among the things that “colonization has destroyed,” and Frantz Fanon writes in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961): “For a colonized people, the most essential value, because it is the most meaningful, is first and foremost the land.” Harkening back to Fanon, Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) defines imperialism as an act of “geographical violence” which deprives the dispossessed of both their land and the meanings attached to it. Decolonization, Said argues, involves a restoration of this lost “geographical identity.”

As these examples illustrate, postcolonial discourse has long shown an interest in place as a point of convergence between the physical world and human history. In their introduction to *Postcolonial Ecologies* (2011), Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey and George B. Handley suggest that this long-standing interest in spatiality can be expanded into a more full-fledged ecocritical analysis. They add that such an analysis involves increased attention to non-human agents, which are acknowledged as participants in, not mere bystanders to, historical processes. Indeed, the twenty-first century has seen growing interest in the entanglement of human and non-human agencies and the “Geology of Mankind” (Paul J. Crutzen), leading to the invention of the Anthropocene as a new geological epoch offering a framework for environmental critique. Yet recent debates have pointed to the colonial underpinnings of this influential concept. In “Indigenizing the Anthropocene” (2015), for example, Métis anthropologist Zoe Todd argues that by establishing a “universalizing species paradigm,” the Anthropocene fails to account for the specific “experiences of diverse people as humans-in-the-world, including the ongoing damage of colonial and imperialist agendas.” Potawatomi philosopher Kyle Powys Whyte (2018)

similarly notes that the notion of historical rupture reflects a Eurocentric perspective: “[T]he hardships many nonIndigenous people dread most of the climate crisis are ones that Indigenous peoples have endured already due to different forms of colonialism.” By challenging Western forms of environmentalism, Indigenous thought and art “offer critical, decolonizing approaches to how to address climate change” (Whyte) and can serve as “critical sites of refraction of the current whiteness of Anthropocene discourses” (Todd).

The 2024 GAPS Conference provides an opportunity to engage with the multiple intersections of colonial and environmental histories, presents, and futures, and to work towards new ways of bridging postcolonial and environmental studies. We invite proposals on cultural representations of human-environment relations in colonial, anti-colonial, neo-colonial, decolonial, and Indigenous contexts:

- How do literary texts and other forms of cultural production reflect, comment on, theorize, or critique colonial and neo-colonial incursions into the lands of others, as well as their ecological repercussions?
- How do they reinforce or counteract hegemonic ways of knowing the environment, and what alternatives do they offer?
- What connections do they draw between past and present forms of environmental oppression and exploitation, and how do they envision (im)possible futures?
- How do Indigenous narratives in different media imagine the relational co-existence of humans and more-than-human entities?
- What spatialities and temporalities do environmental imaginaries and critiques from post-colonial and Indigenous perspectives mobilize?
- How can cultural production be brought into conversation with different epistemologies and ontologies for thinking about the intersection of colonial and environmental violence?
- We also encourage theoretical papers that discuss the relationship between postcolonial studies and ecocriticism. What are the potentials, and what are the limits, of the eco-centric imperative for the study of imperialism?

Please submit your 250-300 word abstract by Monday, 1 January 2024 to gaps2024@es.uzh.ch.

Panel proposals are also welcome; they should include a brief description of the panel and a 250-300 word abstract for each paper. All presenters must be GAPS members by the time of the conference.

Work in progress in anglophone postcolonial studies – including M.A./M.Ed., PhD, and postdoc projects as well as ongoing research projects in general – can be presented in the “Under Construction” section of the conference, for which poster presentations are also welcome. Please submit abstracts for project presentations (250-300 words) indicating your chosen format (paper or poster) by Monday, Friday, 1 March 2024.

A limited number of travel bursaries are available for emerging scholars, part-time, or currently unemployed speakers who are, or will become, members of GAPS. If you wish to apply for a travel bursary, please indicate so via e-mail to the conference organizers by Friday, 1 March 2024.

GAPS strives to create a conference in which everyone can participate in critical discussions of all topics. In particular, if a paper contains discussions of and/or representations of violence, presenters are encouraged to consider whether a content note might be warranted in order to prepare audience members. Content notes should be included in submitted abstracts for later inclusion in the conference program. Presenters are also encouraged to think critically about how they might choose to present such content (visually, orally, as text on a slide etc.).

Feel free to contact the organizers if you have any questions or special requirements: Michael C. Frank (University of Zurich, michael.frank@es.uzh.ch) and Johannes Riquet (University of Tampere, johannes.riquet@tuni.fi).