‘Green Postcolonialism’ and ‘Postcolonial Green’

Literary exchanges

In an article written in 2004 on the increasing traffic between eco-critical and postcolonial literary studies, Graham Huggan noted that the ‘green’ turn in postcolonialism was in effect a sign of the scholars’ admission that it was impossible to analyse modern imperialism and colonialism without engaging with the massive scale of environmental devastation that they entail (2004, p. 702). This, of course, was another way of saying that all colonial and imperial issues were, by their very nature, also environmental issues. Huggan went on to elaborate why eco-critical and postcolonial studies needed each other: whereas the former could help centre the material environment as the primary focus of the latter’s critical perspective, the latter could help combat ‘the tendencies of some Green movements towards Western liberal universalism and “[white] middle-class nature-protection elitism”’ (ibid.) Following this, Huggan suggested five growth areas within this newly configured field of ‘postcolonial green’: environmental activism enhanced by properly analysed ideologies of development; textual practices foregrounding the politics of traditional environmental discourses; a correction of universalist ecological claims; initiation of debate on the rhetorical function and material effects of the discourses of anti-imperialist resistance and intercultural reconciliation; and finally, reinvigoration of utopic thinking in order to assist the global struggle for socio-economic and ecological justice (p. 720).

Writing a year after Huggan, Rob Nixon continued the analysis of the exchanges between the two literary-critical fields, but with the focus more closely on the schisms and discontinuities between them. Nixon identified four of these: whereas postcolonialists had traditionally
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focused on hybridity and cross-culturations, eco-critics have been drawn to ideas of purity; postcolonialists concern themselves with displacements, whereas eco-critics give priority to a sense of emplacement; postcolonialists favour cosmopolitanism, but eco-critics favour a nationalist interpretative framework; finally, postcolonialists are devoted to rescuing marginalized pasts, while eco-critics imagine timeless, solitary moments of communion with nature (Nixon 2005, p. 235). Nixon admitted that he was concerned here with the dominant north American strain of environmental criticism marked by what he calls the ‘wilderness’ and ‘Jeffersonian agrarianist’ paradigms (a neat way of describing Leopold, Lopez and the like). With Huggan, he seemed to suggest that a dialogue between the two fields would help correct these blind spots. Postcolonial (often anti-historicist) exuberance about hybridity and transnationalism would be tempered by a good dose of sober focus on local, national and regional environmental specificities; and eco-critical ideals of purity, conservation and parochialism would be corrected by attention to the imperialist and capitalist bases underlying them. Similarly, the dominant Euro-north American nature paradigms would be replaced by the hitherto marginalized environmental concerns of the ‘global south’. The implications for literary and cultural studies would be twofold. Nixon suggested that this dialogue would lead to an expansion of the literary canon and some properly comparative work (he suggests reading the north American Leslie Marmon Silko alongside the Australian Fabienne Bayet). Perhaps more importantly, Nixon notes that by provincializing north American environmentalism, ‘postcolonial green’ would help us revise the prevailing paradigmatic notions of what is implied by both the terms ‘postcolonial’ and ‘environmental’ (2005, pp. 245–6). We may note here that for Nixon, more so than for Huggan, in the exchange between eco-critical and postcolonial literary studies the former is the more comprehensively re-energized by the dialogue.

As we saw earlier, this coming together of the two academic fields has followed the shifts in the political and historical debates about environment whereby it has become impossible in the early years of the twenty-first century not to place the term itself against historical trajectories of imperialism, colonialism and the manifold resistances to them. It is not possible, for example, to hear the Sierra Club’s William Douglas describe the Middle East as a cursed land without at least considering the possibility that the environmental catastrophe there being enacted is a direct result of centuries of imperialist control by the Ottoman, French, British and finally, American governments. Again, we are explicitly told that the challenge to Euro-north American environmentalism by the