Notes for an article on postcolonial ecology

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28 January, 2025

I created this site in 2008 to house a corrected version of my essay, "Toward an African Ecocriticism: Postcolonialism, Ecology and *Life & Times of Michael K*." I chose "postcolonial ecology" as the domain name, because I thought—and still do think, as I refurbish the site—that the phrase indicates essential features of the uncertain terrain we work on, if we advocate for social justice and healthful natural environments.

I came to this belief while puzzling over a possible ecocriticism suitable for African literature, one that acknowledged colonial pasts and post-independence socio-economic and political difficulties. Such "postcolonial ecocriticism," as I understand it, would be a `mode of critical reading that illuminates this uncertain terrain, where we live without easy answers to urgent social and ecological questions. It would find in texts a significance that might assist, nonetheless, with this historical moment's necessary work: the endless task of aligning reality with social and natural environmental justice—even as societies, experiencing social and political stresses, respond to climate disruption and attempt to prevent further biodiversity loss.

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"Postcolonial" signals usefully the lack of clarity characterizing a considered response to our global interconnectedness. From the outset the term has been ambiguous. It can have a temporal reference, meaning "post-independence." Or it can refer to a kind of cultural and literary criticism emerging in the 1970s that pushed back against the influence exerted still by colonial pasts, and that found unconvincing the anticolonial rhetoric of prior decades.

Each usage raises questions: both Australia and Ghana exist now as post-independence states. So do the USA and Barbados. How does calling them postcolonial help us understand their situation in the current global order? Then as a kind of critical thinking that replaced the discourse of an anticolonial nationalism, how does it account for—and stand up to—all the neocolonial actors and processes still energetically shaping former colonies unequally? Or the former colonies themselves acting similarly towards those economically weaker than themselves?

Ella Shohat, "Notes on the 'Post-Colonial'" (1992), raises such questions—and more. Despite decades of work since the essay's publication, the ambiguities and political limitations it outlines remain. So what value can "postcolonial" have for thinking critically? A simple answer: its ambiguity and limitations mirror the predicament it names. In a globalized world in which modernity, capitalism, and colonizing are historically intertwined, we live tangled still in the social aftermath of colonial pasts, tangled as well in current colonizing processes, some cultural, some socio-economic. There is no obvious escape from this predicament. Within it we struggle to find a politically and ethically adequate discursive response to guide a necessary work beyond

the academy. Shohat's recommendation is valuable, to interrogate the term "postcolonial" even as we use it, while doing the same with other terms that attempt to organize thinking about our historical situation—for example, "anticolonial," "neocolonial," and "decolonial." (Shohat calls for a "mobile set of grids, a diverse set of disciplinary as well as cultural-geographical lenses adequate to [socio-historical] complexities.")

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Ecology, the modern science, supplies an indispensable tool for protecting and building communities' healthful natural environments, as well as for thinking critically about our relation to the earth. (See, for example, the Planetary Boundary project, unthinkable without ecologists' work.) Yet, thinking with ecology while holding to the complexities in "postcolonial" brings into relief important limits to its value—as an indispensable guide.

"Ecology" names a field within biology, a field with many sub-fields. It can also, secondarily, refer to the relationship that organisms have with each other and their environment. This usage depends on the primary meaning. So, too, but more faintly, does an ordinary language usage, to name a sense of nature's interconnectedness—often accompanied by positive emotions. (Ernst Haeckel coined the term in 1866, inspired by thinking derived from Linnaeus: see Donald Worster's account of the term, its uses and its antecedents, in *Nature's Economy*.)

Ecology originates and develops within the conflict-ridden modernity that Europe spread through its colonizing. It gains its authority from adhering to the ethical and knowledge-producing norms underpinning modern scientific practice, norms upheld by academic institutions, which rely on constant funding-streams and the capital investments that enable these. Such capital investments are intertwined with current and past colonizing processes. Ecology, then, as with all the academic work that we rely on to guide us through the modern condition, is advanced by those with the social position to access these funding-streams. In other words, ecology, a crucial field within biology, is advanced by specialists who can afford materially to do the work.

As I write in "Toward an African Ecocriticism," historians have examined in detail the roots of modern environmental concern in European global expansion. And accounts of ecology in action reveal its potential to cause harm, through its relation to bureaucracies which might be well-intentioned but mistaken, or insensitive to local needs, or in collusion with economic elites, etc. Yet, it can also defend local people and environments from those with power through its ability to articulate specifically modern ways of thinking about human and environmental health. So, ecology, while an indispensable and increasing store of knowledge of the natural world, has to be deployed with caution and sensitivity. In situations of cultural and socio-economic disparity, it can be experienced as an arrogant outsider's way of thinking, and oppressive for silencing the value-laden understanding of local communities.

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Before they encountered Europe's modernity, societies globally (and this includes those

within Europe) had their own cultural understandings of life, of humans in the cosmos. Chapter One of Phillipe Descola's superb *Beyond Nature and Culture* offers a compelling survey of such cultural understandings and practices; Carolyn Merchant's classic, *The Death of Nature*, remains important.

The behaviors sustaining such traditional societies are different from those encouraged within modern, capitalist societies—and are frequently in conflict with them. There is a tension, then, between ecology and older ways of regarding life. The former develops within a materialist, secular framing and limits its ethical concerns to the sphere of knowledge-production—although findings in ecology can give valuable substance to ethical and political concern. The latter, in general, view humans as in a relationship with the natural environment characterized by a community's spiritual practices and their ethical and political values.

This tension can be productive when negotiated, resolved, in a kind of cross-cultural work that happens out in the world, case by case, situation by situation—a work that seeks reconciliation between the modern and the traditional.

Can someone steeped in a traditional culture practice ecology—or any other science? Of course. So too can someone immersed in modern societies value scientific findings along with older, spiritual understandings of nature. In these cases the creative negotiation between the two kinds of thinking would be not among people but within them.

Postcolonial science studies—which also works to illuminate scientific traditions, Arab or Chinese, for example, that originate outside of Europe—explores such tensions between knowledges, the traditional or local, and the modern scientific.

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Both ways of thinking about nature matter.

On the one side, ecology (and biology, and the modern medicine derived from biology) cannot be ignored. Ecology can serve the cause of environmental justice, it can measure the harm that modern societies cause natural environments and guide them to less harmful practices. On the other, older understandings of nature, bringing their own observations and insights, cannot be discarded, especially when a capitalist colonizing undermines societies and damages environments. These older ways matter—they too can indicate ways of living that reduce the harms caused by an unchecked capitalism.

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This historical moment calls for being as clear-eyed as possible—about the social worlds we inhabit, with their stress and distress, as well as about the biosphere diminished and polluted, increasingly battered by climate disruption's consequences. Somehow amidst competing discourses and conflicting subject positions, amidst the forces exerted by social institutions and economic activity—as well as by the chaos of geopolitics, we have to hold to an ethics and politics that reduces the harm societies inflict on people, on non-human others, and on the biosphere.

"Postcolonial ecology," posing questions more than it supplies answers, signals the frame within which such problem-solving might beneficially circulate.

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Scholars generally use the phrase “postcolonial ecology” in other ways. The introduction that Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley write to their multi-author collection, *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment* (2011), supplies an interesting example. In the essay I am building from these notes, I map such uses, situating my thinking in relation to theirs. I dwell, too, on a problem that we academics face when referring to traditional, not-yet-modern views of the natural environment's interconnectedness. Using "ecology" is understandable—and when speaking colloquially perhaps inevitable: the English language lacks a single term to denote the "nature/environment understanding of traditional/ancestral cultures." So the challenge lies in how to name such cultural understanding, not yet pressured to change by modernity, that apprehends people’s lives within a living cosmos as it draws on a knowledge validated by careful observation, generation by generation. At the same time, we need to stay alert to the socio-cultural and economic forces that have brought us (usually quite literally *us*, as academics benefit from these forces) to a moment when this question appears pressing. All that is encroaching and destructive in modernity can feel overwhelming, but together, in conversation, modern ecological and tradition-rooted understanding might contribute to conceptualizing better ways of living on a threat-filled planet. It would then be up to us to test these ideas in the real world.

28 January, 2025