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Representations of Ecocides in Settler Colonial Arts and Literatures

Representing Ecocides in Settler Colonial Arts and Literatures in a (Post-)*Terra Nullius* Era: An Introduction

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*Representar los ecocidios en las artes y las literaturas de las colonias de poblamiento en una era (post-)*Terra Nullius*: una introducción*

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TEXT

I would like to express my gratitude and my thanks to Alvar De La Llosa for enabling me to complete this project, the authors who participate in this issue on ecocides, and the peer reviewers who accepted to read the articles anonymously.

1 Settler colonialism is a structure [1] that is expanding in a (post-)*Terra Nullius* era, at a time of ecological recession and geopolitical instability. The *Terra Nullius* doctrine (meaning "empty land" in Latin and literally translated as "land belonging to no human") regarded unoccupied territories as land that could be appropriated. [2] The notion of property and the concept of utilitarianism were later added by British colonists, while the *Terra Nullius* doctrine adhered to a racialized discourse during the colonial era, empowering western imperial nations with the right to claim any land inhabited by a people deemed "savage," "irrational," and "without history" in a Eurocentric understanding of culture and civilization. [3]

2 Joseph Ooko Nyangaga contends that "It is clear that *terra nullius* as a doctrine has undergone numerous transformations over time." [4] Nowadays, the *Terra Nullius* argument can only be claimed by a (landless) people whose motive is self-determination. [5] The history of the *Terra Nullius* doctrine leads some scholars to call its imperialist readings "a work of fiction" [6] or even "a myth" [7] itself undergirded by a racist belief in white supremacy from the 18th century onwards. In a postcolonial and decolonial environmental perspective, I argue that the concept of a "(post-)*Terra Nullius* era" emphasizes the steadfastness of imperialistic readings of the

Terra Nullius doctrine in the 21st century. The brackets surrounding the prefix "post-" contest the timeframe of this legal practice that has long been used to justify the annexation of Indigenous lands – therefore raising doubts on its pastness, as in the concept of postcolonialism. This concept also accounts for the ripples and trauma generated by imperialist *Terra Nullius* claims on Indigenous peoples, Indigenous land and water as well as the natural resources that they contain. In the case of Australia, the *Terra Nullius* doctrine was overturned in 1992 by the High Court during the *Mabo v. the State of Queensland* (No. 2), yet its reversal did not give Aboriginal Australians their sovereignty back.[8] The consequences of colonization and of forced acculturation have been unearthed by the Truth-Telling Commission since 1991, as this Truth and Reconciliation Commission is still listening to testimonies of Australian Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders.

3 Working with the concept of a (post-)*Terra Nullius* era underlines the longevity, persistence, and resurgence of settler colonialism alongside its chronic violence on Indigenous communities whose sovereignty is still contested today. As Russell McDougall, John C. Ryan, and Pauline Reynolds note in their "Introduction to *Postcolonial Literatures of Climate Change*" (2022), Indigenous knowledge, practice, and epistemologies could preserve whole ecosystems from further damage, and yet Indigenous peoples are systematically underrepresented in political decision-making groups concerning climate change issues and solutions.[9] The current capitalist scramble for natural resources especially affects Indigenous peoples in the Arctic region and the Amazonian forest. Deep-sea mining worries Pacific Islanders while warzones are imagined as potential tourist resorts,[10] as though territories and the people living there were mere commodities that could be subjected to a *tabula rasa* wiping out humans, non-humans, and more-than-humans from the map. In a (post-)*Terra Nullius* era, the logic of elimination that Patrick Wolfe described as a key element of settler colonialism[11] is rendered more and more visible in the media as it has become normalized in some nationalist ideologies. This Issue investigating the literary and artistic representations of ecocide in three anglophone settler colonies – India, Aotearoa New Zealand, and Canada – effectively questions the temporal, scientific, and legal limits of this western

ideology, marginalizing waves of decolonial resistance in official history, and racializing mankind to exploit non-whites, non-male thinking beings, non-humans, and more-than-humans.

4 Etymologically speaking, the word "ecocide" means the destruction of a home, a reality that can be measured in many ways and on many levels, from local biodiversity loss, the gradual or sudden disappearance of whole ecosystems, to the full annihilation of natural habitats around the globe. For decades now, scientists have warned against the irremediable damage human-made climate change triggers, and, despite international Agreements and Conventions, the situation has never been worse. [12] Bruno Latour, known for theorizing the passage from a science in action to a form of general truth in science, explained that environmental scientists and humanists should work hand in hand to combat climate change effects and affects. In his last and posthumous book, *Habiter la Terre* (2022), Latour argued that "vous ne pouvez pas aborder toutes ces questions écologiques sans les arts. Si vous n'avez pas les affects capables de métaboliser la situation écologique, c'est beaucoup trop lourd. Vous avez simplement l'angoisse au ventre et le travail est insurmontable." [13] In this context, the articles composing this Issue are ordered in a chronological order to shed light on the long fight for the preservation of the land and natural resources which started from the first contacts between Indigenes and settlers, as well as the variety of genres and artworks used to express humans' concern, awe, and respect for "nature" – an umbrella term whose meaning changes over time and place, depending on cultures and languages, and a term which has often proved its inadequacy to express the very field it is supposed to embrace, leading Patrick Aura in Article 3 to formulate his own theory of "eco-geology" [14] to not exclude rocks and minerals from the landscape.

5 In "The Fifth International Crime: Reflections on the Definition of 'Ecocide'" (2023), Liana Georgieva Minkova explains that the term "ecocide" was first mentioned in relation to the Vietnam War by Arthur Galston who decried the use of Agent Orange on agricultural fields between 1961 and 1971 – a chemical whose dioxin is deemed responsible for cancers and birth defects [15]. Richard Falk then used the term "ecocide" to compare the ecological harm perpetrated by the American army in Vietnam to the genocide perpetrated by the

Nazis during the Second World War.[16] In "Environmental Warfare and Ecocide – Facts, Appraisals, and Proposals" (1973), Falk could write:

> The Indochina context, given the public outrage over the desecration of the land at a time of rising environmental consciousness, creates a target of opportunity comparable to Nuremberg. Surely it is no exaggeration to consider the forests and plantations treated by Agent Orange as an Auschwitz for environmental values, certainly not from the perspective of such a distinct environmental species as the mangrove tree or nipa palm. And just as the Genocide Convention came along to formalize part of what had already been condemned and punished at Nuremberg, so an Ecocide Convention could help carry forward into the future a legal condemnation of environmental warfare in Indochina.[17]

6 In June 2021, ecocide was presented by the International Expert Panel (IEP) to be included in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court alongside the four recognized international crimes: genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and crimes of aggression.[18] The IEP formulated the definition of ecocide in these terms: "'ecocide' means unlawful or wanton acts committed with knowledge that there is a substantial likelihood of severe and either widespread or long-term damage to the environment being caused by those acts."[19] In May 2024, the European Union legally enforced ecocide as an environmental crime.[20] The 2024 Environmental Crime Directive notes that environmental crimes represent the fourth largest organized crime activity in the world and that they generate an 80-to-230-million-euro loss every year. Environmental crimes are defined as "infringements of relevant legal obligations, such as wildlife crimes and deterioration of habitats, illegal shipment or dumping of waste, pollution crimes and illegal trading in hazardous substances."[21] Ecocide is therefore at the forefront of current interdisciplinary and international preoccupations.

7 Destabilizing the traditional settler colonial narrative, too often opposing white settlers to Indigenous peoples, articles composing this Issue interrogate how the overexploitation of natural resources and the destruction of endogenous fauna and flora are perceived by the various communities who co-exist in settler colonies, whether they are Indigenous peoples, white settlers, non-white settlers,

migrants, or political and environmental refugees. Too often, ecocide is framed in the “dying” discourse settler colonialism itself constructs to justify inaction, exactions, and the overexploitation of local natural and human resources. Sometimes, the national narrative can deny its own ecocidal measures altogether, as in Aotearoa New Zealand where some brands do not hesitate to herald its “100% Pure” myth despite the fragility of many endogenous species, massive agricultural production, and the growing number of endangered endemic plants. As Filippos Proedrou and Maria Pournara note, “Ecocide literally means the killing of our home,”[22] interpreting ecocides as ecological genocides. Narratives of ecocides can be analyzed from various standpoints, such as environmental humanities, trauma studies, disaster studies, postcolonial and decolonial studies, ecofeminism, and Indigenous studies. Grace Dillon (Anishinaabe) refers to settler colonialism as a “Post-Native Apocalypse World,”[23] a concept which proves relevant for the Issue at stake as many Indigenous epistemologies promoting a form of symbiosis and respect between humans, non-humans, and more-than-humans have persisted over the years despite massive land confiscation, the loss of sovereignty, a long process of assimilation, and genocides. Texts on ecocides can often be read as a counter-discourse to official history in settler colonies, despite presenting scientific facts.

8 The Issue on “Ecocides in Settler Colonial Arts and Literatures” is composed of six peer-reviewed articles. The whole volume abides by American English, hence the italicization of languages perceived as “foreign” in this framework, although the authors of this volume would have liked to de-italicize Indigenous languages. In “‘Praying to the Devil’: Māori-Centered Histories of Resistance against Forest Alienation in Wairarapa, 1845-1849,” Jamie Ashworth focuses on the *niupepa* (newspapers), *pukapuka* (private letters), and *korero* (speech) produced by the Māori *iwi* (tribes) of the Wairarapa region after the signing of Te Tiriti o Waitangi on 6 February 1840. His analysis highlights the resistance and defiance of Māori against settler practices of deforestation and extractivism, which contradicts colonially inflected theories imagining Māori as passive in front of the degradation of their environment. In “Sacrificed Pasts, Lost Futures: Subjective Inanimicy, Sacrifice Zones, and *Wild Geese* by Martha Ostenso (Canada, 1925),” Patrick Aura develops an “eco-geological”

perspective that encompasses human and non-human interactions to better amplify the role of geology in what is traditionally referred to as "nature." His reading of *Wild Geese* by Martha Ostenso offers new insights in the way Canadian settlers appropriate wilderness and the Indigenous cultures alike while writing their own sacrificial destinies by imposing on the land a narrative of exploitative agri-culture which engulfs them too. In "A Postcolonial Study of *Aranyak: of the Forest* – An Ecocidal Fiction of Colonial India's Indigenous Lands," Mallika Bala and Madhumita Roy offer an environmentalist critique of Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's novel *Aranyak: Of the Forest* (1939). Santal Indigenous perspectives on the wilderness and on deforestation are presented alongside western ecocritical texts to discuss the impact of human activities on the land and on exploitative forestry practices. Contrasting ecological discourses from the North and from the South, this article interrogates humans' place within the universe. In "'This Coal is Gobbling Us Up': Narrating Slow Violence Through Somatic Landscapes in the Fiction of Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar," Atreyee Chakraborty observes how Rob Nixon's theory of "slow violence" illuminates Hansda's descriptions of the Santal in his novel, *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* (2013), and in the short stories composing *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* (2017). The violence endured by the Indigenous communities in the mines of Chotanagpur, and especially the sexual exploitation of Santal women, is compared to the violent treatment of the land itself in an extractivist and turbo-capitalist understanding of human, non-human, and more-than-human relations. In "A Transpacific Approach to Environmental Dis-Asters in Aotearoa New Zealand Ecopoetry," Marine Berthiot analyzes "Unity" by Selina Tusitala Marsh (Sāmoan, Tuvaluan, English, Scottish, and French New Zealander) and "Poem for the Commonwealth, 2018" by Karlo Mila (Tongan, Palagi, and Samoan New Zealander). Methodologies devised in the Pacific, such as the *vā* (the space between), *talanoa* (conversation), and *aroha* (kindness, empathy, love), but also Fuimaono Karl Pulotu-Endemann's *fonofale* health model, are used alongside Rob Nixon's theory of "slow violence" and Maurice Blanchot's perspective on "dis-aster" studies to analyze the environmental trauma affecting inhabitants in Oceania. The closing paper, "Where Will the Bellbird Sing, if Not on the Harakeke? Kaitiakitanga (Guardianship, Custodianship, and Protection) in Te Ao Māori," was offered by Lisa Renard and Awhina

> Tamarapa and reflects the curatorial and sustainable work they are performing with *harakeke* (a flax from Aotearoa New Zealand), *whatu* (weaving), and *raranga* (basketry) both in dedicated gardens and in museums.[24] They draw our attention onto the fragility of Aotearoa New Zealand's unique ecosystem and, by repercussion, onto the sensitive maintenance and preservation of Māori arts, Māori methodologies, and Māori epistemologies, which are all interrelated and co-dependent.

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