

Textures

ISSN : 2971-4109

Éditeur : Université Lumière Lyon 2

30 | 2026

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

Représenter les écocides dans les arts et les littératures des colonies de peuplement dans une ère (post-)Terra Nullius : une introduction

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

Marine Berthiot

 <https://publications-prairial.fr/textures/index.php?id=1250>

DOI : 10.35562/textures.1250

Référence électronique

Marine Berthiot, « Representing Ecocides in Settler Colonial Arts and Literatures in a (Post-)Terra Nullius Era: An Introduction », *Textures* [En ligne], 30 | 2026, mis en ligne le 22 avril 2026, consulté le 22 avril 2026. URL : <https://publications-prairial.fr/textures/index.php?id=1250>

Droits d'auteur

CC BY 4.0



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

Représenter les écocides dans les arts et les littératures des colonies de peuplement dans une ère (post-)Terra Nullius : une introduction
Representar los ecocidios en las artes y las literaturas de las colonias de poblamiento en una era (post-)Terra Nullius: una introducción

Marine Berthiot

TEXTE

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 structure¹ 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 colonialism¹¹ 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 defects¹⁵. 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 Filippou 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 Inanimacy, 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.

BIBLIOGRAPHIE

Primary Sources

Archives

INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL COURT, *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court*, The Hague, The International Criminal Court Publication, 2021, <https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/2024-05/Rome-Statute-eng.pdf> [accessed 02/02/2026].

Press

PROEDROU Filippou and POURNARA Maria, "The EU's New Ecocide Law May Still Let Environmental Criminals Get Away With It," *The Conversation*, 3 May 2024, <https://theconversation.com/the-eus-new-ecocide-law-may-still-let-environmental-criminals-get-away-with-it-228580> [accessed 02/02/2026].

QUINN Ben, "Tony Blair Thinktank Worked With Project Developing 'Trump Riviera' Gaza Plan," *The Guardian*, 7 July 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2025/jul/07/tony-blair-thinktank-worked-with-project-developing-trump-riviera-gaza-plan> [accessed 02/02/2026].

WESTON Phoebe, "Biodiversity Loss in All Species and Every Ecosystem Linked to Humans – Report," *The Guardian*, 26 March 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/mar/26/human-link-biodiversity-loss-species-ecosystems-climate-pollution-eawag-study-nature-aoe> [accessed 02/02/2026].

Websites

EUROPEAN COMMISSION, "Environmental Crime Directive", https://environment.ec.europa.eu/law-and-governance/environmental-compliance-assurance/environmental-crime-directive_en [accessed 02/02/2026].

OFFICE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS & COMMUNICATIONS, "In Memoriam: Arthur Galston, Plant Biologist, Fought Use of Agent Orange," *Yale News*, 18 July 2008, <https://news.yale.edu/2008/07/18/memoriam-arthur-galston-plant-biologist-fought-use-agent-orange> [accessed 02/02/2026].

Works Cited

ANGHIE Antony, *Imperialism, Sovereignty and the Making of International Law*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

AURA Patrick, "Sacrificed Pasts, Lost Futures: Subjective Inanimicy, Sacrifice Zones & Martha Ostenso's *Wild Geese* (Canada, 1925)," *Textures*, No. 30, *Ecocides in Settler Colonial Arts and Literature*, 2025, DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.35562/textures.1284>.

BUCHAN Bruce and HEATH Mary, "Savagery and Civilization: From *Terra Nullius* to the 'Tide of History,'" *Ethnicities*, vol. 6, No. 1, March 2006, pp. 5-26, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796806061077>.

DILLON Grace (ed.), *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*, Tucson, The University of Arizona Press, 2012.

ELDER Catriona, "The Myth of *Terra Nullius*: Indigeneity and Nation," in *Being Australian: Narratives of National Identity*, London & New York, Routledge, 2020.

FALK Richard, "Environmental Warfare and Ecocide – Facts, Appraisals, and Proposals," *Bulletin of Peace Proposals*, vol. 4, No. 1, 1973, pp. 80-96, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/096701067300400105>.

KEENAN Sarah, "Expanding *Terra Nullius*," *The Contemporary Pacific*, vol. 32, No. 2, 2020, pp. 449-460, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cp.2020.0037> [restricted access, accessed 02/02/2025].

LATOUR Bruno, *Habiter la terre : Entretiens avec Nicolas Truong*, Paris, Les liens qui libèrent, Arte éditions, 2022.

McDOUGALL Russell, RYAN John C. and REYNOLDS Pauline, "Introduction to *Postcolonial Literatures of Climate Change*," in McDOUGALL Russell, RYAN John C. and REYNOLDS Pauline (eds.), *Postcolonial Literatures of Climate Change*, Leiden/Boston, Brill, 2022, pp. 1-55.

MINKOVA Liana Georgieva, "The Fifth International Crime: Reflections on the Definition of 'Ecocide,'" *Journal of Genocide Research*, vol. 25, No. 1, 2023, pp. 62-83, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2021.1964688>.

NYANGAGA Joseph Ooko, "The Doctrine of Occupation through '*Terra Nullius*' as a Right of Self-Determination of Peoples and the Legal Status of 'Liberland' Territory under International Law," *Beijing Law Review*, vol. 13, No. 1, pp. 119-132, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4236/blr.2022.131008>.

RENARD Lisa, and TAMARAPA Awhina, "Sans la pousse de harakeke, où chantera le korimako ? Kaitiakitanga (sauvegarde, tutelle et protection) dans le monde māori,"

Recherches & éducations, No. 30-31, *Nouveaux cosmos ?*, 2026, pp. 1-16, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/14197>.

WOLFE Patrick, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research*, vol. 8, No. 4, 2006, pp. 387-409, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623520601056240>.

NOTES

- 1 Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research*, vol. 8, No. 4, 2006, pp. 387-409.
- 2 Joseph Ooko Nyangaga, "The Doctrine of Occupation through 'Terra Nullius' as a Right of Self-Determination of Peoples and the Legal Status of 'Liberland' Territory under International Law," *Beijing Law Review*, vol. 13, No. 1, p. 120.
- 3 Bruce Buchan and Mary Heath, "Savagery and Civilization: From Terra Nullius to the 'Tide of History'", *Ethnicities*, vol. 6, No. 1, March 2006, p. 6; Joseph Ooko Nyangaga, "The Doctrine of Occupation", p. 124; Sarah Keenan, "Expanding Terra Nullius," *The Contemporary Pacific*, vol. 32, No. 2, 2020, p. 452.
- 4 Joseph Ooko Nyangaga, "The Doctrine of Occupation", p. 127.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 124.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 123; Antony Anghie, *Imperialism, Sovereignty and the Making of International Law*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- 7 Catriona Elder, "The Myth of Terra Nullius: Indigeneity and Nation," *Being Australian: Narratives of National Identity*, Milton Park, Routledge, 2007.
- 8 Bruce Buchan and Mary Heath, "Savagery and Civilization," p. 19.
- 9 Russell McDougall, John C. Ryan, and Pauline Reynolds, "Introduction to Postcolonial Literatures of Climate Change," in Russell McDougall, John C. Ryan, and Pauline Reynolds (eds.), *Postcolonial Literatures of Climate Change*, Leiden/Boston, Brill, 2022, p. 8.
- 10 Ben Quinn, "Tony Blair Thinktank Worked with Project Developing 'Trump Riviera' Gaza Plan," *The Guardian*, 7 July 2025.
- 11 Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism," pp. 387-409.
- 12 Phoebe Weston, "Biodiversity Loss in All Species and Every Ecosystem Linked to Humans – Report," *The Guardian*, 26 March 2025.

- 13 Bruno Latour, *Habiter la terre : Entretiens avec Nicolas Truong*, Paris, Les Liens qui Libèrent, Arte Éditions, 2022, p. 98: “You cannot envisage to tackle every ecological issue without the arts. If you are not equipped with the necessary affects to metabolize the ecological situation, then it becomes too heavy to overcome. You are simply overridden with anguish, and your work seems impossible to fulfil.” (My own translation).
- 14 Patrick Aura, “Sacrificed Pasts, Lost Futures: Subjective Inanimicy, Sacrifice Zones & Martha Ostenso’s *Wild Geese* (Canada, 1925),” *Textures*, No. 30, *Ecocides in Settler Colonial Arts and Literature*, 2025.
- 15 Office of Public Affairs & Communications, “In Memoriam: Arthur Galston, Plant Biologist, Fought Use of Agent Orange,” *Yale News*, 18 July 2008.
- 16 Liana Georgieva Minkova, “The Fifth International Crime: Reflections on the Definition of ‘Ecocide,’” *Journal of Genocide Research*, vol. 25, No. 1, 2023, p. 69.
- 17 Richard Falk, “Environmental Warfare and Ecocide – Facts, Appraisals, and Proposals,” *Bulletin of Peace Proposals*, vol. 4, No. 1, 1973, p. 84.
- 18 International Criminal Court, *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court*, The Hague, The International Criminal Court Publication, 2021.
- 19 Liana Georgieva Minkova, “The Fifth International Crime,” p. 63.
- 20 European Commission, “Environmental Crime Directive.”
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 Filippos Proedrou, and Maria Pournara, “The EU’s New Ecocide Law May Still Let Environmental Criminals Get Away With It,” *The Conversation*, 3 May 2024.
- 23 Grace Dillon (ed.), *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*, Tucson, The University of Arizona Press, 2012.
- 24 The French version of the article written by Lisa Renard and Awhina Tamarapa, titled “Sans la pousse de harakeke, où chantera le korimako ? Kaitiakitanga (sauvegarde, tutelle et protection) dans le monde māori,” was published in *Recherches & éducations*, No. 30-31, *Nouveaux cosmos ?*, 2026, pp. 1-16.

INDEX

Mots-clés

écocides, ère (post-)Terra Nullius, colonies de peuplement, humanités environnementales, études sur le trauma

Keywords

ecocides, (post-)Terra Nullius era, settler colonies, environmental humanities, trauma studies

Palabras claves

ecocidios, era (post-)Terra Nullius, colonias de poblamiento, humanidades ambientales, estudios sobre el trauma

AUTEUR

Marine Berthiot

Researcher affiliated with LCE (Lettres et civilisations étrangères), F-69007 Lyon, France; MSCA Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Galway (Ireland)