

RACHEL HUGHES

## race, colonialism and vegetative life

DONALD S. MOORE, JAKE KOSEK AND  
ANAND PANDIAN (EDS)

*Race, Nature, and the Politics of Difference*

Duke University Press, Durham, 2003

ISBN 0-8223-3091-1

RRP US\$ 24.95 (pb)

WILLIAM M. ADAMS AND  
MARTIN MULLIGAN (EDS)

*Decolonizing Nature: Strategies for  
Conservation in a Post-colonial Era*

Earthscan Publications, London, 2003

ISBN 1-85383-749-0

RRP £17.95 (pb)

The trope of fecund, 'tropical' nature as endangering civilised cultures is currently being revived in discourses that cast racial and religious difference as natural threat—witness a recent national broadcaster's off-hand reference to Islamic schools in Indonesia constituting a 'breeding ground' for *jihād* terrorism.<sup>1</sup> Everywhere we see metaphors drawn from a malevolent 'nature' (plague, infestations, cell growth and regeneration, network branching, taking root, and so on) doing time in mediatised political life, if they are not simply being redeployed onto 'nature' itself. *Race, Nature, and the Politics of Difference* (hereafter *Race, Nature*) and *Decolonizing Nature: Strategies for Conservation in a Post-colonial World* (hereafter *Decolonizing Nature*) are two recent collections that get back to nature by attending to race and difference politics in practices of conservation, representation, and the involvement of the state and legal institutions in debating all things 'natural'. In their thinking about nature as socially and historically constituted, these volumes trace multiple contexts in which the naturalising of certain people, practices and relations occurs at great expense to other people, practices and relations. These two books significantly extend critical work on 'natures-cultures', and *Decolonizing Nature* will be of particular interest to scholars of settler-state cultures of nature.<sup>2</sup>

*Decolonizing Nature* and *Race, Nature* differ significantly, however, in their scope, subject matter and intent. The former declares itself engaged in a process of rethinking strategies of conservation in the United Kingdom, southern Africa and Australia in light of 'the complex, contradictory and difficult processes of de-

colonization'. (3) Chapters by William Adams, Val Plumwood and Marcia Langton provide theoretical grounds (with an initial emphasis on Australian conservation practice) for the following detailed case-study chapters on land ownership, use or access and the (oftentimes concomitant) redefinition of 'conservation' in South Africa (Hector Magome and James Murombedzi), Zimbabwe (Murombedzi), Australia (Penelope Figgis, John Cameron, Mattin Mulligan) and the UK (Mark Toogood, Adrian Colston). Amid these studies William Adams contributes a second theoretical chapter on the need to adopt a non-equilibrium model of ecology, noting that the migration from equilibrium to non-equilibrium thinking will fundamentally challenge current 'conservation' practice.

*Race, Nature* seeks to leave nothing so definite as 'conservation' in its wake. The collection so problematises the categories, events, sites, effects and normative terms associated with race and nature that the editors are compelled to spend the first seventy pages of the book (the largest single contribution in the collection) commenting on the scope, importance and enthusiasm of the scholarship contained in the following twelve chapters. This is a lucid and comprehensive introduction to the collection, which follows in four parts: 'calculating improvements'; 'landscapes of purity and pollution'; 'communities of blood and belonging'; and 'the politics of representation'. It also introduces the mammoth interdisciplinary field that studies *natures-cultures* (currently encompassing work in science studies, anthropology, post-colonial theory, race and cultural studies, geography, sociology, political economy and

political ecology). Contributors to *Race, Nature* take aim at the relational and exclusionary underpinnings of various environmental 'realisms': racial science and technologies of measurement in nineteenth-century South Africa (Zine Magubane); certificates of blood purity in postwar Guatemala (Diane Nelson); the 'paradise', for North American men, of the Dominican Republic's sex tourism haunts (Steven Gregory); the linguistic nationalist fortress that is united Germany (Uli Linke); the toxic neighbourhoods of Philadelphia, California and the Santa Cruz River corridor (Giovanna Di Chiro); the remote playgrounds of purified whiteness of *National Geographic Adventure* and *Outside* magazine fame (Bruce Braun); the residence of genetic diseases in 'group history, identity, memory' (Keith Wailoo); and the 'lawned expanses' of museumised disrespect shown toward Brazilian Indians in contemporary Brazil (Alcida Rita Ramos), among others. Braun revives Ulrich Beck's risk society in his discussion of 'risk culture': that which celebrates the white middle-class privilege to take risks in 'beyond the frontier' environments as naturally as it designates exposure to environmental risk (hazard) as the proper realm of non-white, non-middle class subjects.<sup>3</sup>

Contestations of race, class and risk also subtend the field of assisted conception in the Rogers-Fasano case, analysed by Robyn Wiegman. A mistake of *in vitro* fertilisation that eventually led to the United States's first legal recognition of a woman as both genetic mother (to a white baby boy) and gestational surrogate (to a black baby boy, genetically unrelated) for the same live birth, provides 'occasion for the

consideration of the messiness of affect, personhood, property, and kinship that disorganises the racialization of reproduction in contemporary United States culture'. (314) In examining a case in which 'agency is so fully awry', Wiegman rejects 'humanistic inquiry's desire for the individual's self-reflexive articulation to settle the cultural implications and historical determinations raised by the case'. (315) In doing so, Wiegman forcefully demonstrates that a position of 'resistance to any critical project which seeks a kinship with its objects of study', (316) far from delegitimising inquiry into human subjectivity, community and the 'naturalness' of things, makes for detailed and absorbing critique.

Both books also share a concern with the role and status of science and social science (especially genetics and anthropology). While Nelson (in *Race, Nature*), in the context of contemporary 'race' thinking in Guatemala, argues that 'smashing the irrational politics of blood with scientific truths ... cannot resist the constantly morphing power of racism', (142) Donna Haraway, in her chapter on human enslavement to dog genetics, insists that "'Pure science" must not be underestimated; it can lead where its practitioners do not want to go ... [t]hat is its enduring and precious legacy'. (264) Wailoo casts physicians and biological researchers in a drama of 'changing social relations of genetics and medicine' in which 'stories about heterozygotes [symptomless disease 'carriers'] emerged from evolutionary biology, and ... were intertwined with then-contemporary narratives and anxieties about the fate of ethnic identity and racial identity'.

(237) In *Decolonizing Nature*, science is recognised as both a repository of cultural assumptions that designate resources as material entities lacking 'human values and significance' and as a source (the ecological sciences especially) of knowledge and theory that might kick-start non-dualistic modes of thinking about environmental 'goods' and 'bads'.<sup>4</sup>

Both these collections struggle with the historicity or otherwise of colonialism (mainly through attention to colonialism's nature and racisms). Paul Gilroy's compelling contribution to *Race, Nature* envisions a scenario whereby:

Once the postcolonial subjects move in close by ... [t]he previously separated worlds of blackness and whiteness can then be made to leak, to bleed risk, pleasure and excitement into one another as part of selling things and accumulating capital. The magic of these freshly racialized markets means that it is important to recognize and affirm that blackness and whiteness—those interdependent homogeneous magnitudes bequeathed to us by metaphysical dualism—are nothing but transient symptoms of an alienated and dying order. In the meantime, that insight brings little comfort. It does not help us know what anti-racism should be *for*. (90)

For its part, *Decolonizing Nature* initially presents a view of colonialism as an extractive endeavour that ruined nature and oppressed indigenous populations, (3–5) and as a historical process present in identifiable legacies of place, thought and statecraft. One subsequent

claim, that under colonialism ‘ideas about the conservation of nature circulating in the periphery were brought back to the centre’, (5) is somewhat problematic. If this statement refers to settlers’ conservation efforts it risks reviving an old falsehood about the goodly conservation of *resolutely depopulated* ‘wilderness’ (a ‘we knew best’ statement). If it refers to the valuing of indigenous land-based knowledge by non-indigenes (a ‘they knew best but we sat up and listened’ statement), then it contradicts the violent history of dispossession and delegitimation evident in the ensuing contributions.<sup>5</sup> I draw attention to this anomaly not because it is a problem in itself, but because it alerted me to the few explicit discussions (found in Langton’s, Magome’s and Mumbodzi’s contributions) of the constitution of settler-state *racisms*, and their relevance to conservation contexts past and present.

The choice of title ‘Decolonizing Nature’ itself (over, for example, ‘Postcolonial Nature’ or ‘Decolonizing Conservation’) invokes a singular nature of imperial fashionings, but also a certain teleology—the idea that such a project might be both desirable and feasible. Desirable and feasible too, according to chapters by John Cameron and Martin Mulligan, is the acquisition by non-indigenous Australians of new, largely individual, ‘storied’ relations with a re-indigenised ‘poeticised’ landscape.<sup>6</sup> On another scale, Plumwood urges ‘cultural cooperation and convergence between indigenous and non-indigenous communities’ in new place-naming practices in order to displace ‘problem categories of power names, feral names and monological names’. (75) Examining the

workings of the Australian state, environmental organisations, international conventions, Aboriginal cosmology, legislative bodies and commercial entities, Langton cogently argues that ‘indigenous propriety interests in the features of the natural world are fundamental to the sustainability and successful management of landscape and natural resources’. (104) Figgis describes emergent models of governance and management for land and sea areas in Australia—including indigenous protected areas, private sanctuaries and ‘multiple use’ model areas—as enabled by the implementation of voluntary conservation agreements, revolving funds and covenants, conservation management networks and market mechanisms. (203–15)

My main concern with *Race, Nature* is that it risks eliding the fact that the United States’s statehood, societies and race relations are as specific as those of Guatemala, Indonesia or Germany. There is also little discussion of how alternative land governance practices are challenging, or might challenge, land ownership and conservation practices in the United States (especially regarding classic ‘national park’ type *natures*, surely one of America’s greatest landscape exports). The terms ‘terrain’ and ‘landscape’ are used metaphorically in *Race, Nature* to great effect, but there is rather less discussion of specific physical landscapes, land claims or homelands.<sup>7</sup>

*Race, Nature* and *Decolonizing Nature* successfully interrogate discourses of organicism, rational species behaviour and ‘natural’ violence, showing these to be central to pursuits of social order, exploration, pleasure and profit. Such attention provides inspiration for

inquiring and acting beyond the entrenched 'melancholic responses to the loss of imperial privilege and position' that perpetuate older racisms of nature, and holds open the possibility of greater cross-species respect.<sup>8</sup>

---

RACHEL HUGHES is a lecturer in Geography at the University of Melbourne.

---

1. Sally Neighbour, 'Still at Large', *Four Corners*, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 3 November 2003. <<http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/content/2003/transcripts/s981269.htm>>
2. As Bruno Latour argues, 'the very notion of culture is an artifact created by bracketing Nature off. Cultures—different or universal—do not exist, any more than Nature does. There are only natures-cultures'. (*We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter, Harvester Wheatsheaf, New York and London, 1993, p. 104). See the following edited collections: William Cronon (ed.), *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, W.W. Norton & Co., New York, 1995; George Robertson and others (eds), *Future Natural: Nature, Science, Culture*, Routledge, London and New York, 1996; Bruce Braun and Noel Castree (eds), *Remaking Reality: Nature at the Millennium*, Routledge, London and New York, 1998; Noel Castree and Bruce Braun (eds), *Social Nature: Theory, Practice, and Politics*, Blackwell, Malden, 2001; Nancy Lee Peluso and Michael Watts (eds), *Violent Environments*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2001.
3. En route to risk culture's muscular edge, Braun also provides an excellent discussion of the imaginative geographies of civilisation/frontier/beyond the frontier, in which he states that 'the journey into nature was just as much a journey away from something else, and that something else was race'. *Race, Nature*, p. 197.
4. Marcia Langton in *Decolonizing Nature*, p. 90; see William Adams in *Decolonizing Nature*, p. 238.
5. For example, Adams himself states that positive recognition of 'indigenous' environmental practices by colonial Africa's 'scientific' community was 'the exception, not the rule'. *Decolonizing Nature*, p. 30.
6. Apposite is the concern of Haydie Gooder and Jane M. Jacobs in their review of Peter Read's *Belonging: Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership*: 'the connective structures that might enable such emotional (narcissistic reconciliatory) geographies to transform

into political (radical redistributive) geographies remain unclear'. *Cultural Geographies*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2003, pp. 243–6.

7. Chapters by Murray Li and Braun are exceptions to this. Gilroy, paraphrasing Fanon, also reflects upon the importance of such materiality to the 'pursuit of concrete and immediate dignity' when he writes that '[t]erritory ... supplies an "essential value" in the economy of colonial reparations that inevitably also includes the counter-violence and resentment of the natives, the slaves and the unfree'. *Race, Nature*, p. 81.
8. Paul Gilroy in *Race, Nature*, p. 89.