

December 2016

Caminero-Santangelo, Byron. *Different Shades of Green: African Literature, Environmental Justice and Political Ecology*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2014, 214 pp.

Anthony Kola-Olusanya

*Osun State University*, [anthony.olusanya@gmail.com](mailto:anthony.olusanya@gmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://encompass.eku.edu/jora>

 Part of the [African Languages and Societies Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Kola-Olusanya, Anthony. "Caminero-Santangelo, Byron. *Different Shades of Green: African Literature, Environmental Justice and Political Ecology*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2014, 214 pp.." *Journal of Retracing Africa*: Vol. 3, Issue 1 (2016): 71-73. <https://encompass.eku.edu/jora/vol3/iss1/9>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Encompass. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Retracing Africa* by an authorized editor of Encompass. For more information, please contact [Linda.Sizemore@eku.edu](mailto:Linda.Sizemore@eku.edu).

**Caminero-Santangelo, Byron.** *Different Shades of Green: African Literature, Environmental Justice and Political Ecology.* Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2014, Pp. x+ 214 pp.

There is no doubt today that the bulk of environmental damages on the African continent are by-products of western nations' continued assault on the continent's environment and natural resources in an effort to feed their burgeoning industrial complex. Nevertheless, western scholars continue to blame Africans for the problem. This perspective is anchored on the Eurocentric mindset, which suggests that Africans lacked the understanding of their natural environment, proper sensibility, and knowledge of how to take care of the nature, biodiversity and environment.

The book brings to the fore issues that resonated with African indigenous sustainability practices and awareness – environmental humanism. The strength of the book is its deeper connections to the African environmental sensibility and knowledge, anticolonial struggle, social justice, and environmentalism in Africa. Trumpeting the works of African environmental activists and writers like Ken Saro Wiwa, Wangai Maathai, Okot p'Bitek, Ngugi wa Thiongo, and earlier writings which may be 'characterised as pro-environmentalist. The book has four clearly defined objectives. The first objective questions the assumption that Africa has produced little environmental writing. The second part of the book is an exploration of how African literature can challenge the dominant western assumptions regarding African environments, and environmentalism as well as how it can offer powerful counter-narratives. The third part of the book interrogates the accepted definitions of environmental writing and the underlying construction of nature and conservation embedded in them. The final section of the book explores the tensions and contestations in global environmental justice, political ecology, and the African environmentalist writings by presenting literary text in manners which can create new understanding of effective environmental justice struggles.

On the strength of the aforementioned, the book also drew on a critical perspective informed by political ecology and theories of global environmental justice to discuss African environmental writings. As explained by the author, African environmental writings tend to prioritize social justice, the lived environment, livelihoods, and/ or the relationships and privilege. This statement set tone for the discourse in chapter one of the book entitled "The nature of Africa." In this chapter, the author linked environmentalism in Africa to the popular shaping of the continent as region by imperialism. To establish the linkage, the author framed his discourse on African environmentalists' action as one which is set to address social

conflict, environmental change, and resource extraction in Africa. The chapter also highlights why global environmental and political ecology can be a useful tool for framing the African environmental writings and conceptualization of resistance to imperialistic development on the continent. The chapter also presents varied views, perceptions, and portrayal of the African continent by western writers as irredeemable chaotic domain of diseases, violence, and poverty without explicitly connecting the degraded natural resource and environment as the consequences of the unsustainable anthropogenic development.

In chapter two, the discourse centred around the “The nature of African environmentalism.” The chapter drew its strength from the legacies of African environmental writing from East Africa by exploring the implications of anticolonial tropes and antipastoral themes for struggles against environmental injustice (5). The author focuses on Maathai’s pastoral discourse, anchored long history of environmental writing and rhetoric. The book also focuses on the writings of prominent African environmentalist authors including, Okot p’Bitek, Nurudin Farah, Ngugi wa Thiongo and the relationships among these authors’ works was explored. For instance, Maathai, warned that, the typical kinds of attitudes towards traditional subsistence farming and the pursuit of monocrop agriculture and plantation farming have been ecologically and socially disastrous for poor African farmers thereby contributing to food insecurity and malnutrition as well as reduction of loss of local/indigenous biodiversity. The chapter also explores the relationship between the writings of Maathai and Thiongo, using anticolonial narrative. Both writers’ works enjoy some level similarities and differences and this can be seen from the interpretation, and presentation, and focus of their writings, which “represents an unambiguous or uncomplicated progression even in term of environmental discourse”(49). The chapter concludes with a discussion on the power of African environmental writings and their essence in the building of environmental consciousness.

Chapter three of the book, “The Nature of Justice,” opens with discourse on the beginning of the South African environmental justice movement and the challenge it poses to green imperialism. The chapter focuses on post-apartheid novels as well other works of fiction published before 1980 to examine the South African environmental justice writings. The author in this chapter pointed to the atrocious sufferings meted on black South Africans under the apartheid regime and how such injustice helped create a new movement. The focus of the new environmental justice movement includes issue of race or racism and questions of distribution, disproportionate impact, or marginalization that comes with racism and denials by linking environmental issues to broader development concerns as it affects other non-white races living in South Africa. To investigate environmental

justice in South Africa, the chapter explores the writings of post-apartheid writers like Alan Paton, Besie Heads, Zake Mda and Nadine Gordimer. All the writers variously echoed the growth of environmental justice as being responsible for the conceptualization of the environmental justice struggle in post 1990 South Africa.

Chapter four of the book, “The Nature of Violence,” focused on the writings of Ken Saro Wiwa as the opening dialogue into issues of oil violence in Nigeria and insidious environmental degradation as well its implications on the health of the people of the region. The author also delves into other literary works of writers such as Tanure Ojaide, Ogaga Ifowodo, as well as Chinua Achebe as the prism from which the struggle for environmental justice in Nigeria’s delta region and Africa can be imagined or viewed. In his writings, Ken Saro Wiwa questions the logic of petro development in Nigeria especially in terms of the contradictions of development and environmental ruins leftover in its wake. A common theme in this chapter is the connections found in these writers’ focus on ethnic identity and their ability to ground the accompanying environmental resistance narratives in relation to current conditions. Suffice to say that the works of the writers continue to echo in the daily sufferings of the people of the delta and their struggles.

Finally, the book’s concluding section presents a summary of the four chapters of the book. To conclude, Seminario-Santangelo raises the question of how to conceive the place in relation to the politics and conceptual challenges it poses to environmental injustice narratives. According to the author, the tradition of environmental writings discussed in the book “challenges hegemonic assumptions regarding development, conservation, and nature as well as the separation of ecological projects from socio-political relations” (186). In general, the book presents an opportunity into gaining an open and varied view into the environmental justice struggles in Africa, the unjust forms of imperialistic development and the consequences of extraction of natural resources and environment. This reasoning perhaps explains the title of the book as well as a highly informative source on the image of the African continent and the nature of struggles for continental environmental protection.

Anthony Kola-Olusanya  
Department of Geography  
Osun State University, Nigeria