LITERATURE, ARTS, AND ENVIRONMENTAL STORYTELLING IN AFRICA

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Abstract

While scientific and policy accounts are key to situating Africa's environmental crises, they are insufficient for capturing the cultural, ethical, and affective dimensions of ecological change. In this article, I analyze environmental storytelling in African literature and the arts as embodied ecological imagination and public critique. Using African ecocriticism, postcolonial environmental humanities, and the environmental justice movement, I examine oral traditions, literary forms, the visual arts and performing arts, and the Niger Delta as an archive of ecological storytelling. A close reading of Helon Habila's Oil on Water demonstrates how the storytelling practices of fragmented narratives, polluted spaces, and bodily vulnerability render the violence of resource extraction (and the effects of the violence) felt and experienced, as opposed to measurable and quantifiable. I contend that African environmental storytelling is beyond representational; it connects the perception of the environment to an understanding of the past, and it amplifies the voice of the dispossessed in the community, and it aids in creating a more equitable community and environmentally just world.

Keywords: African ecocriticism; environmental storytelling; Niger Delta; eco-aesthetics; environmental justice

Introduction

In Africa, discussions on the environment usually focus on specific metrics like pollution and emissions. These metrics are important to analyses, however, environmental changes are also perceived through emotions like loss, grief, attachment, and fear. Literature and the arts are able to add layers to these analyses by presenting Nature and the arts through various expressive means. Ecological Criticism asks how the disruption of Nature is perceived and how cultural forms impact the level of environmental damage and how it is perceived (Garrard, 2022). In African literary criticism, this idea has emerged from discussions about the history of colonialism and the extraction of resources, and the import of perceived, separate forms of Nature and the Nonhuman to the human realm. Vital (2008), Slaymaker (2001); and others, argue that African ecocriticism needs to engage with the colonial legacy and the diverse forms

of contemporary livelihood, as well as the relationships among land, livelihood, and community. This paper refers to environmental storytelling in order to describe the artistic, literary, and oral forms through which community relationships are expressed.

There are three parts to the argument. First, environmental storytelling is a form of ecological knowledge rather than a form of ornamentation added to scientific fact. Second, the aesthetic form of environmental storytelling reveals environmental injustice by illustrating harm that is dispersed and/or occurs over time. Third, the case of the Niger Delta shows that environmental storytelling connects ecological destruction to issues of voice, blame, and power. Thus, the argument draws on African ecocriticism as well as the postcolonial environmental humanities and environmental justice.

African Ecocriticism and Environmental Storytelling

Partially originating from criticism of frameworks placing the preservation of wilderness at the forefront of every environmental debate, African ecocriticism broadens the scope of the African historical experience of land which incorporates ecological space, sustenance, ancestral memory, political sovereignty, and the place of resource extraction. Slaymaker (2001) urged resistance to the automatic and uncritical assignment of the agendas of metropolitan environmental discourses. Vital (2008) proposed the development of African ecocriticism through a postcolonial lens. Caminero-Santangelo (2014) relates African literature to environmental justice and political ecology, and argues that the access and authority dimensions of environmental risk and political struggle are essential to ecological discourse.

This paradigm challenges the presumed separation of the discourses of culture and nature. Iheka (2017) argues that African literature can ascribe agency to animals and the material environment of landscapes, and does this without the romanticization of what he terms a "simplistic tradition." Ihka's (2021) African Ecomedia builds on his earlier work and explores media beyond the printed word. Environmental storytelling (as iheka proposes) is the use of eclectic and innovative formal choices to generate an audience's ecological imagination and understanding such as choosing a particular medium, sequence, perspective, rhythm, and images. This concept draws on the narrative and cultural knowledge embedded in indigenous practices without romanticizing them as always ecologically sustainable and holistic. Environmental storytelling is a practice that has a high degree of generative capacity and elasticity because it can respond to the challenges of contemporary life such as modernity, state interventions, the changing nature of spirituality and the dominant extractive economy and serve as a locus of resistance.

Oral Tradition, Indigenous Knowledge, and Ecological Memory

Oral tradition is an invaluable tool for storing environmental memories. From songs and narratives to folklore and proverbs, observations about seasons, animals and water, even about community and the cultivation of danger and obligations, can all be

recorded. These stories don't represent preserving a never-changing ecological state, but instead tell the stories of how to interpret and analyze the state of relationships in the landscape. In many African situations, the oral and written forms combine the material and the symbolic. For example, a river could be a physical resource, a location of a memory, a sacred place, and part of a collective identity at the same time. Postcolonial ecocriticism also helps explain the value of these forms in the state of the environment today. DeLoughrey and Handley (2011) argue that colonialism reorganized the environment and the state structures, and DeLoughrey (2019) elaborates how the cultural forms counter the damage of environmentally violent acts that are spread across space and time. Therefore, oral and literary forms can record the memories of the environment that formal, expert elicit archives cannot. This is especially important for communities that have to tell the story of the destruction of their environment using the language of the state and corporations, who lack concern for the environment and community.

The Niger Delta as an Archive of Environmental Storytelling

The Niger Delta is an important location for the study of African environmental narratives. The region exemplifies the paradoxes of extractive development. At the national level, oil production has increased revenue; at the community level, oil production leads to environmental pollution and damage to the community's economic base, as well as the erosion of community rights to demand accountability and remediation. The Environmental Assessment of Ogoniland examined the magnitude of the remediation crisis due to the extensive contamination of Ogoniland by hydrocarbons (United Nations Environment Programme, 2011). Narratives address the harm caused to the environment through the perceptions, displacements, fears, and memories of the people who live within the distorted geographies of the environment.

Helon Habila's Oil on Water (2010) offers an excellent example of this. The novel follows the story of Rufus, a young journalist, and his colleague Zaq, an older journalist, as they navigate the creeks of the Niger Delta. Their purpose is to locate and free the wife of a British oil company executive, who has been kidnapped. Hummel (2020) argues that the novel's contribution to environmental discourse stems from its unique structuring of the landscape of oil extraction in which the story is set. Ecological harm is not a minor plot detail. The landscape of the Niger Delta, which is characterized by polluted water, damaged communities, smoke, and disruption, continually shapes the perceptions of the characters and the trajectory of the plot. The novel also employs the sensory distortion of space to articulate the impacts of ecological degradation, by making the characters' journey disorienting.

The novel's fragmented structure is important as well. The Delta's expectation of an overarching narrative is contradicted by the changes in memory, testimony, and perspective. The same can be said for the social instability caused by conflicting corporate, governmental, military, and community claims. Instead of placing

environmental crises as a discrete "event," Habila situates the environmental crisis as an ordinary, cumulative condition that is an ongoing part of daily existence. This is a reflection of Nixon's (2011) idea of "slow violence." Environmental damage is violence that is gradual and dispersed. It is difficult to portray violence that takes so many forms and is so spread out over time. Analyzing Oil on Water through the lens of environmental justice also reveals the intentionality of the narrative structure. The novel asks the reader to consider the hierarchy of suffering, the boundary of the newsworthiness of loss, and the marginalization of so many other losses. Caminero-Santangelo (2014) states that much of African environmental writing connects ecological devastation to the injustices of the political order. Habila's work does this not by sketching a simplistic picture of moral failure, but by showing the diverse, fractured, and failing institutions and exposed communities. It's powerful because it asks the reader to reconcile the unreconcilable and understand the consequences of extraction.

Eco-Aesthetics, Public Narrative, and Perception

Environmental storytelling incorporates both subject matter and form. In relation to eco-aesthetics, this involves considering how the choices of an artist can influence how we think and feel about the environment. For example, a series of the same image may show us the effects of gradual environmental destruction. If an artist presents their work in a way that is out of chronological order, this may reflect instability. Also, a variation in how an artist presents work from different perspectives may show the differing claims that coexist regarding the same environment. Heise (2008) mentions that the potential of an artist to imagine the environment is at its greatest when they can create a bond between the local and the global. The African literary and artistic forms are able to make this bond because they address household experiences, and can also incorporate memories, both communal and national, as well as the global systems of extraction that impact Africa.

The arts have the ability to shock audiences from complacency towards environmental destruction that has become normalized. Nixon (2011) describes the challenges that slow violence presents to representation; in response to this difficult reality, aesthetics can give form to the passage of time. Visual arts, performance, film and poetry can all render the technical unusually and critically problematic in a sensorily and affectively experiential way. Eco-social devastation and the precarity it engenders are driving the imagination of new artistic practices. (Demos, 2020) Art will not, and should not be expected to, consistently and directly impact policy. It should be more accurately and justly viewed as an expansion of the imagination and ethics. Environmental art can be therapy for neglected experiences and a clearing of the imagination for the best possible environmental future. Environmental storytelling will bring new dimensions of environmental perception to the public.

Postcolonial Environmental Justice and the Politics of Voice

Postcolonial environmental justice examines the distribution of environmental benefits and burdens, the processes behind decision making, and the inclusion of different

knowledge systems. Schlosberg (2007) argues that justice is of multiple facets: recognition, participation, and distribution. In the context of African extractivism, the threat to the environment is often most concentrated in those communities that lack power to influence the corporate or state decision making. Literature and the arts have a role to play in making previously marginalized voices heard. Huggan and Tiffin (2015) argue that the focus of postcolonial ecocriticism has to be the connection between the legacies of imperialism, current economic power, and the way the environment is represented. In a similar way to Huggan and Tiffin, Wenzel (2019) shows the power of world literature in articulating the environmental crisis and the unbalanced environmental conditions. African environmental literature is the conjunction of the historical and the present environmental concerns.

Environmental literature critiques postcolonial narratives and reconstitutes an understanding of relationships and responsibilities from an environmental perspective. The purpose of this literature is to highlight the importance of local environmental knowledge and local ecologies, while not undermining the actual science. Environmental decisions are placed in context when they are grounded in local and placed based ecologies.

Conclusion

African environmental storytelling shows ecological crises as having material, historical, cultural, and ethical dimensions. African ecocriticism has advanced when it has critiqued outsider theories of 'nature' and showed the various histories through which landscapes become places of livelihood, memory, extraction, and struggle. African environmental storytelling embraces oral and written forms, as well as visual and performing arts. This storytelling shapes the audiences' ability to envision the past and articulate their opposition.

The Niger Delta is an especially good case for this example. The novel Oil on Water portrays the extraction of oil and its many associated consequences. It does not provide a direct description of environmental destruction. Oil on Water uses fragmented journeys, unreliable testimony, and the wreckage of the landscape to express the violence of extraction. This method of storytelling lacks many of the functions of scientific storytelling. It cannot describe the ways in which the world has been altered due to extraction and destruction. By enhancing our perception of the environment, and framing this within the context of injustice, the art and literature of Africa can help envision the future.

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