R. Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, chapters 1 & 8

Summary: Across these two chapters, Nixon engages the project of situating environmental *literary* critique within discourses of postcolonialism, capital, and governance. In doing so, he argues for an environmentalism that decenters Western (especially American) imaginaries of unsullied landscape and back-to-the-land with a focus on the developing world—both to excavate new strategies for environmentalism and postcolonialism, and to attend to emergent networks of risk and blame enabled by neoliberal regimes. In this presentation, I bring this work into conversation with feminist and queer ideas of partiality—drawing chiefly from Haraway's "Manifesto for Cyborgs"—to explore the theoretical challenges of wholeness/hybridity/situatedness in eco-critique.

→ Concepts and Contexts

- Nixon's first chapter offers a two-pronged eco-critique of neoliberal capital using Indra Sinha's novel *Animal's People* (2007). 1) The novel reveals "the environmental" as constituting complex webs of citizenship, governance, and accountability. Pollution events transform individuals into biological citizens and mergers & acquisitions stymie attempts to identify guilty parties and petition for redress. 2) He argues for a reading of an eco-critique out of the novel's generic form—the picaresque, which centers the displaced underclass and proposes new strategic temporalities, motilities, and alliances in the wake of pollution events.
- His second chapter situates a history of eco-critique in the West within (and at times in supposed opposition to) postcolonial studies. Western eco-critique has often construed itself as an accidental outgrowth of American studies in a focus on the transcendentalist canon and imaginaries of return to ecological sublimity / unsullied wilderness. As such, postcolonial studies has often viewed eco-critique as complicit with American empire, imperialism, and nationalism, as well as in opposition to ideas of hybridity and displacement.
- Nixon then argues for an environmentalism emerging from and in direct conversation with the developing world. Such an environmentalism could devise new tactics and temporalities from postcolonial notions of partiality and hybridity, over and against a focus on being-in-place, and that could become "directly entangled with ongoing, quotidian struggles for survival" (254). Such an environmentalism would in turn invigorate postcolonial studies towards "a more historically answerable and geographically expansive sense of what constitutes our environment and which literary works we entrust to voice its parameters" (262).

→ Key Terms

- Neoliberalism, (that bogeyman of academic terms), a political and economic philosophy whereby markets substitute for / do the work of governance and arbitrating the commons. In Nixon's view, such ideologies "erode national sovereignty" and inevitably produce loophole structures whereby powerful actors can evade responsibility for their actions (46).
- Biological citizenship, new citizenships and governance relations produced by the admixture of toxins and bodies (think the bureaucratic arrangements produced after the Chernobyl disaster), which in turn affectively unify the poor across the developing world (notes of Anzaldúa here) (47).
- Abjection, drawn from Julia Kristeva, the process by which something is "cast off" from the whole and constituted as "other," and in doing so *also* constituted the original whole *as a whole itself*. This, Nixon argues, is a key value of the picaresque novel: staging this abjection (55).
- Bioregionalism, an environmentalism responding to one's immediate environments, "whose boundaries are determined by a location's natural characteristics rather than arbitrary administrative boundaries" (238). While this approach can be useful in "instill[ing] in us an awareness of our impact on our immediate environment," it more often than not opens "out into transcendentalism than transnationalism" (238).
- Environmental double consciousness, a reframing of DuBois's concept: a postcolonial tension between the kinds of beauty-in-place reflections on a colonial environment and the submerged violence that erupts from such environments (246)

→ **Haraway's "Manifesto for Cyborgs" and Ecologies of Complicity**

Ecologies of Partiality

- Haraway's opening metaphors engaging ideas of hybridity and partiality are often those of pollution: "…the boundary between human and animal is thoroughly breached. The last beachheads of uniqueness have been polluted if not turned into amusement parks" (10). Such a pollution is a corruption in the same sense as the Sierra Club environmentalists Nixon opposes in chapter 8, but with a reverse point of view: this pollution/corruption is the starting point for new "oppositional strategies," rather than signifying the need for return.
- Partiality emerges across a number of registers in Nixon: *partiality of body* (Animal as both human & animal, twisted by pollution); *partiality of identity* (Saro-Wiwa both African & environmentalist [an absurd partiality but one nevertheless insisted upon by imperialist American environmentalism]); *partiality of landscape/place itself* (pollution a violent admixture of land and pollutant, with linkages back to the original lands/powers that engaged the pollution in the first place). For both theorists, corruption is not a new mode instituted in the wake of industrialization, but rather a base state *revealed* as such. The challenge for Nixon, however, is in corruptions/pollutions that *cannot* be empowering (notes of Bordo here?), given their immediate violence.

Ecologies of Complicity

- Partiality and hybridity may then be ways to understand the *entangled complicities* of Nixon's project. The mergers-and-acquisitions section (63–65) is useful here: in polluting, or even by simply engaging a transnational neoliberal project, the Western corporation extends its body (*corp-*) into the developing nation. In then evading responsibility the company reconstitutes its *body*, making an implicit argument about the nature of its presence in the developing nation: that it was never there in the first place, that it was never part of that ecosystem, nation, or the bodies & lives of the people who worked for in and near it (63).
- Haraway's concept of "affinity" may also be a productive framing of the kinds of "biological citizenship" produced in the wake of pollution events and that are traces of these entanglements. *Animal's People* then might be read as an archive of strategic affinities forged by biological and tactical necessity in opposition to the fluid, transnational, immanent power (read: Hardt/Negri, Deleuze/Guattari) of the *Kampani*. (One might also argue that biological citizenship imposes undesired-though-still-strategically-exploitable affinities between the poor and the corporations who pollute.) The challenge for a postcolonial environmentalism may then be in constituting productive affinities across increasingly arbitrated (though more-and-more porous) national and identitarian lines.

→ **Discussion Questions**

1. Of course, there's another aspect of Haraway's essay that might be useful to read over Nixon's chapters: that of the "homework economy" and increasingly feminized and precarious labor (37–45). What role do gender and sexuality play in Nixon's environmental project? Does pollution's "slow violence" affect women and queer people differently? (While much of this question might be speculative, I also want to draw attention to the particular *kinds* of labor that gets dislocated to developing countries: what can we say about the nature of Western companies' presence in such countries?)
2. Nixon brings environmentalism into productive tension with postcolonialism, and I've started to chart out some directions for bringing it into conversation with feminism. What other theoretical approaches have we considered in this class that might be enriched in an encounter with environmentalism, or vice versa?