



# EARTH 16-18

ECOCRITICISM AND RACE THEORY IN THE HUMANITIES 16TH-18TH CENTURIES

## CALL FOR PAPERS

Université Côte d'Azur, Nice (France) 3-4 July 2024

**Confirmed Keynote Speakers: Nandini Das (Exeter College, Oxford University), Sujata Iyengar (University of Georgia, Athens, US), Shaul Bassi (Università Ca'Foscari, Venice), Scott Slovic (University of Idaho, US)**

The recent crises the contemporary world faces have implications for individuals, the environment and societies, as we are living an unprecedented human-made, planetary environmental crisis which may affect hundreds of millions of humans, animals and plants over the next century and is already showing its impact on many. Some prominent examples are the threat posed by rising waters in Venice, the growing problem of climate refugees, the conditions of places where colonial legacies (Bangladesh) or racial inequality (Florida) make the matter even worse or the contribution of environmental racism to persistent inequalities. In “Racial Ecologies: A View from Ethnic Studies”, Curtis Marez argues, for instance, that “[h]istorically, all sorts of racialized and gendered workers—slaves, indentured servants, farm workers, prisoners, and factory workers—have been exposed to toxins and subjected to environmental degradations” (Marez 2018, xii). The intrusion of so-called natural phenomena into human activities makes it impossible to ignore the link between human and non-human entities or to pretend that the environmental, geopolitical and human emergencies are not connected.

Although Ecocriticism (which focuses on the relationship between environment, nature, animals and humans), and CRT (Critical Race Theory) and PCRS (Premodern Critical Race Studies) (which are based on the study of how bodies are defined by power relations) have developed extensively in the Humanities since the 1990s<sup>1</sup>, very little critical attention has been devoted to the overlapping of these two approaches in the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. We believe, however, that it is precisely through the intermingling of these two critical methodologies that the Anthropocene<sup>2</sup> – the impact of humans on the environment – can be best observed, as human activity has reached such intensity that it has been described as a “geological driver” (Baldacci et al., 9). Although the very concept of “Anthropocene” has only recently become acceptable among hard scientists, the Humanities can contribute to its theorization and will do so during this symposium. We believe it is important to think about the human when we think about the environment and *vice versa*. Moreover, given what we are learning about both the contribution of environmental and climate change towards social and

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<sup>1</sup> Kerridge (1998), Garrard (2014) among others for ecocriticism and Hall (1995), Loomba (1998) and Iyengar (2004) for PCRS. Myers (2005) focuses on both race and ecology. Some critics, like Huggan and Tiffin eds (2015) or DeLoughrey and Hanley eds (2011), also focused on the convergence between ecology and race in studies on postcolonial ecocriticism.

<sup>2</sup> The Anthropocene has received many definitions over the past decades. See W. Steffen, P.J. and J.R. McNeill, “The Anthropocene: are humans now overwhelming the great forces of nature”, *Ambio*, 36, 2007, 614-621; Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin, “Defining the Anthropocene”, *Nature*, 519, 2015, 171-180.

racial injustice, it is only through an increasing awareness of these interactions that we can develop and activate environmental change.

This two-day academic symposium (3-4 July 2024) on ecology and race from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century will apply both ecocriticism and race theory that period. We hope to historicize the interconnectedness of human beings and the natural world in the early modern and modern age before looking at the impact and repercussions of early modern racial and ecological theories in our contemporary world in an “Ecology and Race Campus” on the 5<sup>th</sup> of July 2024, the 3<sup>rd</sup> day of activities.

The critical approaches themselves (Ecocriticism, CRT, PCRS) have changed between the moment they emerged in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and today, and a reflection on that epistemological and critical evolution will be helpful. Ecocriticism gradually acknowledged human depredations on natural environments. First-wave ecocriticism<sup>3</sup> focused on the separation between humanity and wilderness and celebrated the wild and the sublime. Second-wave ecocriticism, which developed in the second part of the 1990s, promoted a more comparative and transcultural approach, and third-wave Ecocriticism was theorized by Scott Slovic and Joni Adamson in their introduction to the Summer 2009 special issue of *MELUS: Multiethnic Literature of the United States* when they further integrated cultural background and ethnic identity in their methodology, thus promoting more diversity in the field of ecocriticism. This evolution makes it possible to connect third-wave Ecocriticism with Critical Race Theory.

Although we particularly welcome paper proposals whose methodologies are situated at the intersection of Critical Race Theory and Ecocriticism or which adopt an intersectional approach, we are happy to receive papers on any aspect of literature, race, culture, and environment in the early modern and modern periods in francophone or anglophone literatures. Questions proposers might consider include: How does Ecocriticism attend to the link between aesthetics and ethics? How does third-wave Ecocriticism transcend boundaries to explore how our perception of nature is mediated by race, class, gender and geography? How might a transcultural approach to the environment help explore new ways of thinking about animals, humans, ethnicities, plants, and the environment? This symposium intends to bring together scholars of different disciplines, working on different centuries and different corpuses to raise questions and engage critically with race and ecology. We hope that it will encourage people to think more in terms of diversity, inclusivity, biodiversity and interdependent ecosystems.

### **Suggested Critical Conversations about Ecology and Race**

#### ***Hierarchy, Human and Non-Human: Power, Othering and Disposability***

From early modernity to modernity, different hierarchical taxonomies of humans emerged and gave way to **axiological systems** to define identity and alterity. Between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, racial markers were based on heredity and physical traits deemed as natural, such as phenotype and skin color, but also on cultural differences such as religion and nationality (Loomba & Burton, 2007).

In the symposium, we invite participants to lay the emphasis on **human mastery over nature** and the ways human beings have othered the environment, the “more-than-human,” as a whole – the more-than-human including animals, the plant kingdom, minerals and landscapes.

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<sup>3</sup> The term “Ecocriticism” was first coined in William Rueckert’s 1978 article “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism.”



How can we understand the othering process when applied to nature, to human beings and to both? How and why might humans view nature and other beings as intrinsically different and alien to themselves? Papers dealing with how minoritized/oppressed humans attempt to empower themselves by controlling and exploiting the environment and papers dealing with how humans seize power by controlling and exploiting nature will be appreciated.

In the case of settler colonialism, both indigenous human beings and their environment are regarded as **disposable matter**, *i.e.* to be used and abused. The land becomes a “plantation” while the inhabitants lose their political autonomy and often end up internalizing the ideological discourse of the colonizers. We encourage participants to raise the question of place and space to study the colonizers’ appropriation of the colony’s environment and of the colonized themselves.

### *Environmental Determinism, or Nature Shaping Humanity*

If humans attempted to prove their mastery over nature, nature itself exerted a deep influence over human beings according to ethnological theories which date back to Antiquity. In *English Ethnicity and Race in Early Modern Drama* (2003), Mary Floyd-Wilson coined the term “**geohumoralism**” to refer to climate theories according to which the climate (for example temperature, wind, humidity and sunlight...) affects the **physiology** as well as the **psychology** of human beings. This concept reveals the power that nature has on human beings, by defining them through the environment they come from.

How did early modern thinkers and writers read the **climate theories** of Antiquity? How did they appropriate them to serve their own ideological agenda? To what extent were climate theories tools used to construct nascent nationalism in the Renaissance and beyond? How does the physical environment predispose societies and states towards particular development trajectories? How were these theories used as a tool to legitimize colonialism, racism and imperialism in Africa, Asia and the Americas? How is the concept of race shaped and constructed by the relations between non-human living entities (such as plant life, weather phenomena, climate)? How is climate a racial marker? How do narratives and myths about nature account for the genesis of Blackness?

Environmental determinism cropped up in **early modern and modern travel literature**. Papers addressing the role of the foreign gaze will be more than welcome, in particular those emphasizing the different strategies used to construct otherness – the *other* environment, the *other* people, and above all how the environment is othered through a portrait of the inhabitants. How does travel have an impact on both physical human bodies and natural landscapes? What consequences did the movement and circulation of peoples, vegetal and animal species and commodities have on the environment?

Racial terminologies deploy the symbolism of nature to discuss **human embodiment**, mainly but not only, through the use of **stylistic devices such as metaphors and metonymies** which are “demonizing, commodifying, excluding, animalizing, infantilizing, associative and sexualizing” (Ndiaye 2022, 236). The racialized imagery of nature makes race-making more tangible. To what extent is nature racialized through anthropocentric devices such as personification? How is race associated with the plant kingdom, namely earth, soil, roots, seeds, springs and stocks, among others? How is the tree metaphor central both to a reflection on non-human nature and human nature? Can we speak of the poetics of racial nature, or of the racialized environment?



## ***Epistemologies of Ecology and White Supremacy***

The priority? Importance? that humans assume influence our worldview as well as their perception of the natural world and the discourse we use to make sense of everything we experience. Yet what is considered “human” has varied historically. How is seeing nature through the prism of Christianity, Whiteness and heteronormative patriarchy different from the Muslim, Jewish – as well as other lesser-known indigenous belief systems – queer and women’s perception of nature? Do **religion and gender** shape the way we understand our relationship to the environment? To what extent can being racially privileged, or underprivileged – as in the case of the enslaved and the colonized – explain our relationship to the natural world?

The way human beings write about themselves and about the natural world seems to be influenced by their own **racial positionality**. The very knowledge human beings gather about the natural world is connected to the impact they have on the environment. To what extent does race change the way we experience nature and write about it? Papers addressing the specificity of the BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color), Afro-descendant, postcolonial, or BAME (Black And Multi-Ethnic) experience of nature in fiction, non-fiction or the visual arts, will be appreciated as well as those challenging White epistemologies to point out *other* ways of conceptualizing nature.

Moreover, might early modernity and modernity historical periods in which human beings go beyond the master/slave dialectic with nature? How can **decolonial practices** of unlearning open up critical conversations about race and nature to renew the way we look at the past, to raise awareness and to promote environmental and social justice? How can understanding the past be a strategy to prepare for the future?

### **Non-exhaustive list of suggested topics**

- Ecology, race and axiological systems
- Human mastery over nature and nature’s mastery over humanity
- Non-Human, human and disposability
- Travel literature, ecology and race
- Early modern drama, landscapes and race
- Climate theories and “geohumoralism”
- Environmental racism and environmental justice
- Metaphors, metonymies, topoi and tropes
- Environmental and racial awareness
- Evolution of critical and scholarly approaches to ecology and race

**Suggested Critical and Scholarly Approaches** : Ecocriticism (first, second and third waves), Ecomaterialism, Ecofeminism, Animal Studies, Critical Race Theory and Premodern Critical Race Studies, Critical Whiteness Studies, Queer of Color Critique, Queer Studies, Cultural Materialism, Gender Studies, Intersectionality, Indigenous Studies, Disability studies, History of emotions...

### **Deadline and Expected Formats for the Presentations**

Please send your proposals for individual papers of 20 minutes in French or in English (title, 300-word abstract, and 150-word bio), or for pre-formed roundtable discussion panels whose participants will give 5-minute presentations (title, 100-word abstract and 150-word bio) to Prof. Emmanuelle Peraldo ([emmanuelle.peraldo@univ-cotedazur.fr](mailto:emmanuelle.peraldo@univ-cotedazur.fr)) and Dr. Nora Galland ([nora.galland@univ-cotedazur.fr](mailto:nora.galland@univ-cotedazur.fr)) by **15 September 2023**.



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## Ecology and Race Campus, 5 July 2024, Université Côte d'Azur, Nice

Following the two-day academic symposium on race and ecocriticism from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century that will historicize the interconnectedness of human beings and the natural world (see corresponding tab on the website), our “Ecology and Race Campus” on the 5<sup>th</sup> of July 2024 will be dedicated to **workshops, outreach to local schools, the creation and display of performances and art**. Its aim is also to give students and doctoral students in creation studies - particularly in poetry and theatre - the opportunity to **give free rein to their inspiration** in order to propose original artworks on the relationship between race and ecology. Opening **a dialogue with young people** (interventions by secondary school teachers and their classes) will enable us **to create widespread public awareness of these issues and of the necessity to think about race and environment as two interdependent notions** as we **think about the state and future of society and nature** and advocate for more social and environmental justice. We want this exploratory day to provide food for thought for a wide audience – and create a *think tank* – but also to **increase the capacity of teachers to effectively teach literature and art related to issues on diversity and inclusion and/or the environment**.

The main objectives of that Ecology and Race Campus are to:

- Provide **training workshops for secondary school teachers and university professors** in which Prof. Sujata Iyengar will share her “service-learning class” experience on “Literature in the Natural World”, and in which Prof. Nandini Das will talk about training and community-building (TRACTION project). This Ecology and Race Campus will be very helpful for secondary school teachers of English in France who work on the following themes that are part of the national modern languages syllabi: “Travels and migrations”, “Meetings with other cultures”, “Representation of the self and relations with the other”, “Fictions and realities”, “Save the planet, imagine the future”, “Identities and exchanges”, “Territory and memory”, “Relationships between the individual and the group”, “Migration and exile”, “Roots and heritage”, “Frontier and space”, “Common heritage and diversity”, “Rivalries and interdependence”, “Knowledge production and diffusion”, “Unity and plurality”, “Art triggering debate”. The workshops and the work done in the year 2023-2024 will **provide tools for teachers in secondary schools or at university to tackle these burning issues in a way that favors dialogue, creativity and constructive exchanges**. The experience of professors who have implemented such tools/exchanges in their classes will be very valuable.
  - **Nandini Das**, Professor of Early Modern Literature and Culture at Exeter College, University of Oxford, and Project Director of the ERC (European Research Commission) project TIDE on travel literature and race will be leading a workshop with secondary school teachers as she also developed a pioneering platform of training, resources, and community network to equip teachers with an effective training on issues of race, belonging and migration (TRACTION: Teaching Race, Belonging, Empire and Migration). Her expertise in that field



will be precious for our Ecology and Race Campus' outreach to local schools, teachers and pupils.

- **Sujata Iyengar**, Professor in early modern British literature, will lead a workshop on how to teach literature with an ecocritical perspective and how to sensitize students to ecological issues. In 2023-2024, she will be teaching a new service-learning class, "Literature in the Natural World", in which students will study literary texts about nature and work with an on-campus or non-profit community partner to deepen students' comprehension of the natural world. She will share her experience at our Ecology and Race Campus and a collaboration between our Master students in Nice and her students at UGA in America will take place.
- Enable the high-school **students and pupils** of the teachers that take part in the experiment to present their results/posters/projects and to enable French university graduate students who worked on these issues in 2 of their classes to present their results/posters/projects through the organization of **roundtables on the place and impact of race and ecology in their syllabi** and more generally in their daily lives.
- Provide **creative workshops and /or displays and performances (all day/during lunch time)** with students in dance, theatre or poetry to make them either read existing poetry, or write original pieces on the concepts of race and environment or express their creativity through their bodies with dancing or theatre. We also invite **artists** who reflect on the environment, the current climate crisis as well as the issues of race, gender and class to contact us and propose installations and/or performances.
- **Raise awareness** of the necessity to fight against fake news (including emergent threats from Artificial Intelligence), stereotypes and prejudice when talking about issues of race and environment; & raise awareness of the potential for everyone to act, and of the power and scope of personal accountability when it comes to ecology and race issues through **a roundtable on multiculturalism and ecology** open to professors, teachers, pupils, students and anyone interested in taking part in the conversation. (With Scott Slovic and Shaul Bassi).
  - **Scott Slovic** is University Distinguished Professor of Environmental Humanities at the University of Idaho and Senior Scientist at the Oregon Research Institute. He has been teaching multicultural environmental literature for more than thirty years in the United States and as a visiting professor in various other countries. In the summer 2023 he is the co-organizer of a summer teacher institute focused on the environmental humanities for middle school and high school teachers in the state of Idaho, sponsored by the Idaho Humanities Council, and one of the key elements in the institute will be multicultural approaches.
  - Initially a specialist in critical race studies, Professor **Shaul Bassi** from Università Ca'Foscari in Venice has been working for some years in ecocriticism, being in particular Director of a Master's Degree in "Environmental Humanities". His role in this project is to show the importance and stakes of creating degrees in environmental humanities.