

Tropical Landscapes and Nature~Culture Entanglements: Reading Tropicality via *Avatar*

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Abstract

Landscape integrates both natural and cultural aspects of a particular geographical area. Environmental elements include geological landforms, waterscapes, seascapes, climate and weather, flora and fauna. They also necessarily involve human perception and inscription which reflect histories of extraction and excavation, of planting and settlement, of design and pollution. Natural elements and cultural shaping by humans – past, present, and future – denotes that landscapes reflect living entanglements involving people, materiality, space and place. A landscape's physicality is entwined with layers of human meaning and value – and *tropical landscapes* have particular significance. The Tropics is far more than geographic and needs to be understood through the notion of tropicality. Tropicality refers to how the tropics are construed as the exoticised Other of the temperate Western world as this is informed by cultural, imperial, and scientific practices. In this imaginary – in which the tropics are depicted through nature tropes as either fecund paradise or fetid hell – the temperate is portrayed as civilised and the tropical as requiring cultivation. In order to frame this Special Issue through an example that evokes tropicality we undertake an ethnographic and ecocritical reading of *Avatar*. The film *Avatar* is redolent with images of tropical landscapes and their nature-culture entanglements. It furthermore reveals classic pictorial tropes of exoticism, which are in turn informed by colonialism and its underlying notions of technologism verses primitivism. Furthermore, *Avatar* calls to mind the theories of rhizomatics and archipelagic consciousness.

Keywords: tropical landscapes, nature-culture entanglements, *Avatar*, tropicality, exoticism, primitivism, rhizomatics, archipelagic consciousness

Entering Entangled Landscapes

Landscape integrates both natural and cultural aspects of a particular geographical area. Landscapes incorporate environmental elements including geological landforms, waterscapes, seascapes, climate and weather, flora and fauna. They also necessarily involve human perception and inscription which reflect histories of extraction and excavation, of planting and settlement, of design and pollution. Natural elements and cultural shaping by humans – past, present and future – means landscapes reflect living entanglements of people, materiality, space and place.

A landscape's physicality is entwined with layers of human meaning and value – and *tropical landscapes* have particular cultural values. The tropics is commonly defined in geographical terms as the region of Earth on either side of the Equator extending to the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn. Yet it is far more than geographic and needs to be understood through the imaginary of tropicity. Tropicity refers to how the tropics are construed as the exoticised environmental Other of the temperate Western world as this is informed by art and culture, and imperial and scientific practices. In this imaginary – in which the tropics are depicted through nature images as either Edenic paradise or pestilential hell – the temperate is portrayed as civilised and the tropical as requiring cultivation.

During the age of exploration and colonialism, the tropics were viewed as vast landscapes of raw material – ripe for exploitation. The massive extractivist industries of mining and logging were entwined with those of slavery and plantationscapes. Thus, destruction of the tropics was an integral facet of a drive for cultivation – equated with civilisation. In this imaginary, Indigenous people were rendered part of the tropical landscape, seen variously as fauna, or as a resource to be exploited – and often extracted from their indigenous lands. Yet tropical landscapes were also intimately shaped and understood by Indigenous peoples as living entities – including being active agents in human life, the abode of the ancestors, and resonant with meaning.

Tropical landscapes can be approached from a range of disciplinary and interdisciplinary fields, and in the collection of papers brought together in this Special Issue on 'Tropical Landscapes: Nature~Culture Entanglements' these fields of inquiry include: architecture, archaeology, anthropology, history, heritage, garden design, literature, travel writing, memoir, geophilosophy, ecogothic, ecofeminism, ecocriticism, ethnomusicology, geopolitics, poetry, botany, science and technology, photography and film. However, before venturing into the various landscapes, waterscapes and seascapes of this collection of papers, we first offer a brief introduction to tropicity and then place this concept within the landscape of the movie *Avatar*.

Landscapes of Tropicality

The tropics was conceived through a Western imperial lens which continues to inform our views of tropical worlds. The term 'tropicality' aims to give a sense of this complex phenomenon involving geography, geomorphology, climatology, and biology, expressed in science, medicine, social sciences, popular culture, literature and aesthetic discourses and practices.

Tropicality involves two major tropes that separate and intertwine to form an ongoing and dynamic image of the tropics. In one imaginary the tropics is a Garden of Eden, presenting landscapes and waterscapes of rich biodiversity – a fecund, exotic, paradise. The opposing image conjures the tropics as a torrid zone – wild, primitive, unconquerable, inhospitable and pestilential.

As tropical geographer Dan Clayton summarizes:

Tropicality is the age-old discourse (or suite of ideas, experiences, sensations and representations) through which 'the West' regards itself as 'temperate' (moderate, secure, comfortable, self-controlled and staid) and 'the tropics' as alien and its opposite (a domain of allure, seduction, danger, riot and excess). This temperate/tropical opposition has been conceived foremost in environmental terms, [and] historically through capitalist and colonialist expansion and exploitation.... Tropicality helped to produce empire and buttress Western ideas of dominance and superiority (Clayton, 2021, p.55).

The idea of the tropics gained renewed interest in geographical discourse with the publication of Pierre Gourou *Les Pays Tropicaux* in 1947. Analysing this text in the context of the long history of the making of the tropics, David Arnold engaged in a critical theorisation of the notion of 'tropicality'. Tropicality, inspired by Edward Said's celebrated theory of *Orientalism* (1978), analyses the ways in which the tropics have been conceived as a conceptual space and not just physical space. Like 'the Orient', 'the Tropics' are an imagined geography (Arnold, 1995; Clayton, 2021). However, in tropicality, this discourse takes on a strong environmental perspective. Tropical environments (landscapes, climates, geomorphologies, flora and fauna) and peoples, were rendered primitive, undeveloped, disease-ridden and devoid of self-autonomy and agency.

Subsequently, extensive ensuing discussions of tropicality were taken up in the *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* (Arnold, 2000; Driver & Yeoh, 2000; Bowd & Clayton, 2003; Savage, 2004). Furthering a radical reconceptualisation of the tropics Aimé Césaire, used the term *tropicalité* as an anti-colonial concept that subverted and

reverted the colonial agenda. Importantly his concept was conceived through experiences of his native Martinique and strongly demonstrates how the tropics speaks back to the temperate (Césaire & Roussi, 1978; Clayton, 2021; Boyd & Clayton, 2019; Lundberg et al., 2021).

Tropicality continues to permeate contemporary ideas. These tropical panoramas have hugely impacted popular culture and have entered our everyday notions and experiences of the tropics. Mapping these tropes through science fiction magazines, Ben Menadue demonstrates that the tropics as hostile, wild and chaotic environments and climates were strongly portrayed in the first half of the 1900s. However, by the latter half of the last century, tropical jungles were portrayed through an ecological imagery, and rendered as endangered. Tropical science fiction reflects the wider popular culture and scientific understanding of the tropics (Menadue, 2017).

Importantly, tropicality, although forming into a discourse during the European expansion into the tropics, is not limited to a historical period. It continues to be an important concept in postcolonial discourses, in agendas of decolonisation, and is re-invented in practices of neo-colonial expansion. Tropicality continues as an imaginary in science and medicine, in the social sciences, arts and literature, and in popular culture.

Yet, beyond discourse, tropicality eminently revealed itself in material practices. Europeans engaged in a discursive *and* biogeophysical alteration of the tropics. Seen as virgin wilderness untouched by human beings, the tropics was presented as wild and dangerous. And only dangerous animal species and humans could inhabit an equally dangerous environment. Thus, the colonial project, rooted in tropicality, took upon itself a dual mandate: to civilise the wild beings of the tropics; and to cultivate the wild lands of the tropics, making them useful for the European project of colonisation and industrialisation.

Contrary to the European idea of *terra nullius*, which saw lands as empty and ripe for exploitation, the tropics was already, and anciently, a coproduction of human beings and nature. It was a self-sufficient pre-existing world of beings, meanings, ghosts, and deities. The colonial discursive reconstruction of the tropics and its inhabitants, as well as efforts deployed to enact that colonial imaginary, engendered new forms of territorialisation that clashed inexorably with the pre-existing meanings and forms of being.

The Europeans sought to remake the tropics in the image of Europe. The colonial project to civilise was a technocratic endeavour that dispensed with the pre-existing moral order of the tropics. And inevitably, colonial expansion met with forms of discursive and material resistance. In the Niger Delta of Africa, communities

sabotaged European trading companies, and were in turn subjected to reprisal military attacks. In some of the largest instances of land grabbing, settler colonialism relocated communities from their ancestral lands and converted these same lands into conservation parks. Dispossessed communities regularly violated European designs and boundaries, breaking into wildlife sanctuaries to extract resources for subsistence. Those caught breaking European rules were severely punished.

Tropicality constructed a tropical world that was closer to the intentions of Europeans than the lived world of the tropics. Nevertheless, efforts to remake the tropics in line with such preconceived notions also failed as European territorialisation encountered resistance. At the same time, the pre-European moral order and ways of being lost its vitality as it confronted this contrary logic of being. Inevitably, the tropics that emerged through this encounter with European discourse-practice, was neither the outcome envisaged by the Europeans, nor the resistant tropics of the pre-European era. What emerged was the unintended outcome of the interactions, conflictual and harmonious, between the tropics (nature and peoples) and Europeans.

Avatar as Tropical Landscape

In order to frame this Special Issue through an example that evokes tropicality and many of its discourses and practices, we undertake an ethnographic and ecocritical reading of *Avatar*. The film *Avatar* is redolent with images of tropical landscapes and their nature-culture entanglements.

Avatar (2009) was an epic 3D science fiction film directed by James Cameron. The movie aimed to visualize an extraterrestrial tropical jungle and the threats of deforestation and ethnocide of Indigenous peoples due to neocolonial exploitation. The film portrays overarching themes of imperialism verses deep ecology, and connotes the history of European colonisation of the pantropical regions of the Earth – but with a particular emphasis on the Americas. Despite the problematic heroic storyline that centres around a ‘white saviour’ who falls in love with Neytiri, the clan princess, and rescues the technologically ‘backward’ Indigenous people, the film was overwhelmingly popular and a huge box office success.¹ The long-awaited sequel is now scheduled for release in December this year. It is thus timely to analyse the film’s tropical landscape as a rich manifestation of tropicality.

Avatar is set in 2154 as humans are colonizing Pandora, a moon of an exoplanet within the Alpha Centauri system. The aim is to extract the highly profitable mineral

¹ It was the highest grossing movie for 10 years.

unobtainium.² The mining company,³ backed by an army of mercenaries, threatens both the indigenous wildlife and the local tribes of humanoids called the Na'vi. The film's title *Avatar* refers to a genetically engineered Na'vi body which is operated through the neural networks of a corresponding, but remotely located, human. The avatar (originally referring to the human or animal incarnation of a Hindu god on earth) enables the humans to have the physiology of the Na'vi, with the aim of being able to interact with the Indigenous people more 'naturally' (including being able to breathe the air of Pandora which is toxic to humans).

It is from the viewpoint of these avatars that we first experience the breathtaking landscapes of Pandora – from the geomorphology of floating mountains, to jungles teeming with extraordinary flora and fauna, to ancient Hometrees with their massive trunks and spreading branches that are the sacred abode of several rainforest Na'vi clans. And all these landscapes evoke tropical exotics. The extraterrestrial exotics of this tropical moon have been documented in an *Avatar* survival field guide (written from the viewpoint of the colonisers). As on Earth, where the tropics were conceived through the eyes of European colonisers as an exotic landscape where plants, animals and people were embroiled in a narrative of conquest and adventure in an exotic land, we note that the introduction to the Pandoran tropics is likewise via a panorama of colonizing humans.

Exoticism is closely entangled with colonialism and its fascination with, and fear of, the Other – which extends to both wildlife and peoples. Exoticism of landscapes in *Avatar* creates panoramas of lush tropical biodiversity or of savage predatory jungles. The exoticization of humans is similarly rendered through notions of romanticism and primitivism.

In her extensive mapping of primitivism across arts, humanities and social sciences, Marianna Torgovnick, in *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (1991), demonstrated how Western society portrayed alternating images of Indigenous peoples as either the noble savage at one with nature, or life-threatening (often cannibalistic) primitive – thus moving between romanticism and primitivism. She noted that to enter into a study of the tropes of primitivism was to enter an exotic world which was simultaneously a familiar world.

This can also be said of entering the landscapes of *Avatar*, for they bring to view an exotic yet familiar world. In the following reading of the film we incorporate visual ethnography with an ecocritical reading of the film, while drawing on the text *An Activist Survival Guide: A Confidential Report on the Biological and Social History of Pandora*

² Unobtainium is a superconductor material necessary to run the extensive maglev systems of Earth and space.

³ The mining operations are part of the Resources Development Administration (RDA) – the largest non-governmental organisation in space. The company has monopoly rights to all products from Pandora as well as all space locations. Consequently the RDA is extremely powerful in capital, political influence and military capacity.

(Wilhelm & Mathison, 2009), and our personal first hand experiences of Earth's various tropical regions – Southeast Asia, Tropical Africa and Australia, and the Caribbean. Our reading of *Avatar* begins with the rich tropical exotics of geomorphology, flora and fauna; we then analyse the way in which *Avatar*'s landscapes of technologism and primitivism demonstrate Western binary logic; and finally turn to the notions of rhizomatics and archipelago consciousness, calling on the work of Caribbean theorists, to explore the film's nature-culture-spiritual entanglements.

Tropical Exotics

The floating Hallelujah mountains remind us of the amazing limestone karst formations of Halong Bay in Vietnam which rise directly out of the waters forming thousands of small islands that appear to float among the reflected clouds.⁴ In the film, the Hallelujah mountains are likewise islands, circulating in magnetic currents, as if forming an archipelago in a grand pacific sea. The crowns of the mountain isles are covered in lush vegetation, which gives way to thick vines that hang down sheer cliffs alongside cascading waterfalls. Here in this magnetic vortex, the coloniser's technical instruments are rendered useless (and thus give way to the potential for guerrilla tactics).

Although the floating mountains are perhaps the most dramatic landscape of Pandora, the moon is also covered in spectacular flora. This botany ranges from recognisable exotic species – including glimpses of the Australian kangaroo paw (*Anigozanthos*) and giant carnivorous pitcher plants (*Nepenthes* and *Sarracenia*) – to the extraterrestrial outlandish. Pandora comprises various biogeographic landscapes, but it is the rainforests filled with extraordinary tropical plants and wild animals that the film depicts. We encounter this jungle early in the film, when Jake Sully (in his avatar body), bored by the scientific field work being carried out by Dr Grace Augustine and Norm Spellman, wanders off along a jungle path filled with ancient tree ferns and cycads (*Pseudocycas altissima*), and comes upon a grove of *Helicoradium spirale*, a species of "sensitive zooplantae" that coils up in response to the slightest touch, triggering a cascade of retracting plants.⁵ The exoticism of this plant includes its non-binary plant-animal, land-ocean status. The plant strongly resembles the Christmas tree worm (*Spirobranchus giganteus*) that lives on Earth's tropical coral reefs ranging from northern Australia, through the Indo-Pacific and the Caribbean. Other non-binary vegetation includes the panopyra which defies our Earthly taxonomic plant groups, lying somewhere between plant, fungus, and jellyfish. The panopyra is epiphytic and, like many tropical epiphytes, grows high in the canopy of rainforest trees. The indigenous species of Pandora (plants, animals and the Na'vi) are also bioluminescent

⁴ The mountains are actually based on the karst formations of Southern China, but the Halong Bay mountains have that floating quality due to being reflected in the waters.

⁵ Na'vi are able to wander among *helicoradian* without triggering this defensive response.

– emitting their own light through corporeal chemical reactions. On Earth, most light emitting organisms are found in the oceans, but some are terrestrial, like the fungi and fireflies that illuminate rainforests at night.

The fauna is likewise tropical exotic. The shy hexapede – which can be found hiding in giant stands of heliocoradia – is perhaps one of the most graceful land animals on Pandora. The hexapede resembles a six-legged African impala. These dark blue herbivores have yellow and white stripes and their heads are topped by a retractable lyre-shaped fan structure complete with ocellus, which, like the eyespots on the Madagascan moon moth (*Argema mittrei*) is a mimetic device to scare predators.⁶ Twin lines of dark bristles run down its long neck and along its back.

However, it is the giant hammerhead titanothera and the ferocious thanator that Jake Sully, in his avatar body, encounters in the field of heliocoradia. Both these animals are not only exotic, but also suggest prehistoric beasts. The hammerhead titanothera (*Titanotheris hammercephalis*) is twice the size of an elephant, and resembles a massive six-legged version of Earth's extinct *Brontotheriidae*, but with the head of a hammerhead shark. The titanothera which grazes in herds in forests and jungles, is extremely territorial, and frequently engages in aural and visual threat displays. When angered the animal will lower its head and charge; alternatively, when avoiding conflict, it will display a large "fan" of bright blue-purple feathers on its head accompanied by a loud roar, which will scare most creatures off. This does not, however, scare the thanator.

Xenobiologists postulate that the thanator (*Bestiapanthera ferox*) is the alpha terrestrial predator on Pandora. The enormous and muscular animal with its jet-black skin has some resemblance to Earth's fast and agile black panther, but with characteristics of the primitive *Gorgonopsia* (saber-toothed predators). Its neck and back are covered in chitinous armour, while its massive distensible jaw reveals long sabre teeth and the upper lips retract to maximise tooth extension. Ten yellow and red sensory quills sprout from plates that encircle the rear of its skull. The quills function as a sensory device – perhaps echolocation – as well as a menacing display. Like most Pandoran animals (excluding the Na'vi and the prolemuris) it has two sets of gill-like openings on the side of its neck and is hexapedal. This ferocious jungle-floor carnivore has a preference for nocturnal hunting (Pandorapedia, n.d.; Avatar Wiki⁷, n.d.).

⁶ Note that this may be automimicry where the eyespots misdirect predators to a false head above the hexapede's skull.

⁷ While academic texts refrain from the use of Wikis, in the context of popular culture, Wikis become useful documentation devices. In the case of *Avatar*, enthusiasts document the film in great detail including referencing information sources. The Avatar Wiki is thus a viable resource and worth citing.

It is no wonder that the chatty prolemuris (*Prolemuris noctis*), has evolved to live in the canopy of trees. This animal resembles Earth primates, but with its two arms split into four forearms, thus increasing arboreal mobility. The highly social prolemuris dwell in trees in large tribal bands and are similar to lemurs and monkeys. As with Earthly evolution of humans from apes, it is suggested that the presence of blue prolemuris on Pandora indicates a similar evolutionary relationship between the Na'vi and other extinct species with primate morphology (Pandorapedia, n.d.). Like the Na'vi (and humans) the prolemuris has large eyes with binocular vision, and an apelike skull with a short snout and nostrils. However, its jaw contains needle-sharp teeth adapted to cut through tough jungle vegetation. Although predominantly herbivore, they also eat insects.

Pandoran insects include the venomous hellfire wasp (*Magnivespa velox*) with its exoskeleton, compound eyes, bioluminescence, and a dual stinger. The Hellfire wasp builds nests in fallen trees of rainforests and swamplands. At the other end of the insect spectrum is the iridescent Shimmyfly which shows similarities to Earthly butterflies (*Lepidoptera: Papilionoidea*). This graceful insect can be seen glimmering through tree-filled valleys on its many, almost crystalline, wings.

Thus, the trees of Pandora support epiphytal plants like orchids and nectar eating insects, as well as nests for birds and arboreal primates. The gigantic Hometrees which stand above the canopy of the jungle landscapes of Pandora are also used as treehouse sanctuaries by several forest dwelling Na'vi tribes. Hometrees are like a hybridization of the Earthy Rain Tree (*Albezia saman*) of South America with its broad canopy, the supertall Meranti tree (*Shorea faguettiana*) of Borneo that peaks above the misty jungle canopy and is supported by buttress roots at its base, and the pantropical Banyan tree (strangler fig) with its massive circumference of intertwined adventitious prop roots.

Like a Banyan, the hollow base of the Hometree is comprised of many enormous prop roots which form natural columns that support a huge communal space in which the Na'vi hold meetings, eat, sing, dance and worship Eywa. At its centre is a spiral staircase of entwined roots that ascend the hollow trunk. The interior of the tree proffers many alcoves and also broad branches between which the Na'vi sleep in cocooning hammocks. When Jake Sully is rescued from the jungle by Princess Neytiri, he is taken to the 10,000-year-old Hometree of her tribe, the Omaticaya. Like other sacred trees on Pandora, the Omaticaya Hometree sits on a large deposit of the precious mineral unobtanium, and has thus come under the surveillance of the colonizing mining company.

Technologism & Primitivism

The mining company has a problem with the Indigenous inhabitants of Pandora. In the film's arrival scene, as the Valkyri shuttle approaches the moon, it flies across tropical rainforests and the panorama of an enormous open cut mine before landing in the Hell's Gate compound. The last to leave the shuttle is the paraplegic marine veteran, Jake Sully, who descends from the cargo door in his wheelchair onto the spaceport tarmac just as a gigantic Hell truck, returning from the mining fields with its rich load of unobtainium, looms into view. Several arrows stuck in its massive tires, rotate slowly as the truck drives by. This initial imagery sets the scene for an ensuing premise of technologism verses primitivism, and coloniser verses indigenous.

Hell's Gate compound, with its concrete buildings, industrial plants, hangars and storage facilities, and its constant stream of massive extraction machinery and military-armoured vehicles, is the prime facility of the RDA.⁸ Hell's Gate is the centre for human colonial organisation on Pandora. The brutish grey compound is surrounded by a pentagonal security fence with weapon towers for defence against intrusions by hostile Pandoran wildlife or Na'vi warriors. The fence is surrounded by a thirty-metre-wide denuded strip which is regularly patrolled by automatic plant-clearing machinery and the spraying of acid mining byproducts. Within this fortification, and occupying the largest building in the main administration complex, is the Ops centre which oversees operations and communications. Its core is the control room where a Halotable live-streams conditions over Hell's Gate and strategic parts of Pandora, including the Hometree of the Omaticaya clan (Pandorapedia, n.d.).

Hell's gate, the Ops centre, and the Halotable constitute the structure of a panopticon with their defensive fort structures, centralised control and their extensive surveillance capabilities via three-dimensional holographic display. While the human colonisers are associated with separation from nature, brute force technology and panoptic surveillance, the Na'vi are visualised as part of the tropical landscape and rendered in primitivist imagery.

In the opening scene viewers are made aware of the Na'vi through the image of fragile arrows⁹ stuck in the enormous tyres of a Hell truck as it rolls across the compound. We are immediately made aware that while the colonisers possess the latest technological capability for both extraction and military purposes, the Na'vi use

⁸ Resources Development Administration. Hell's Gate official name is Resources Development Administration Extra-Solar Colony 01 (RDA ESC 01).

⁹ According to the Avatar survival guide, there are several types of Na'vi arrows – indicating their precision of use for battle, hunting and fishing, as well as practice arrows for children. Ordinary hunting arrows have a large bone arrowhead which is bound to a reed shaft with plant glue and fibre (Wilhelm & Mathison, 2009, p. 88), while warrior arrows have a stem of dark wood with a long arrowhead made of natural black obsidian glass which has a vein of bioluminescence running through it (Pandorapedia, n.d.). Initiated hunters and warriors use a bow carved from a branch of the Hometree.

traditional technology, equated with the Earthly Paleolithic age and connoting backwardness or a lack of evolutionary development.

While the opening scene portrays the vulnerability of the planet and the Indigenous people to colonisation for the purposes of resource extraction, and thus evokes the trope of the noble savage at one with nature; this image quickly turns to the imaginary of the primitive as existential threat. In his prep talk to the newly landed recruits, Colonel Quaritch, the chief of Security Operations, warns:

Out there beyond the fence, every little thing that crawls, flies, or squats in the mud wants to kill you and eat your eyes for jujubes. That's a fact. We have an indigenous race of humanoid called the Na'vi. They're fond of arrows dipped in neurotoxin that will stop your heart in one minute. They are very hard to kill. Our mission on Pandora is to keep the peace. And to protect human life in the single most hostile environment in the known universe (Cameron, 2009).

It is evident that the RDA, and SecOps, the company's private military force, view the Na'vi as primitive – as hostile as the environment, and as problematic. While poison-tipped arrows are used by indigenous people from Africa, to Asia and South America, we are here reminded of Spanish conquistador portrayals of the Carib peoples (Kalinago) of the Caribbean's Lesser Antilles. With their long hair and poison-tipped arrows,¹⁰ they were considered particularly threatening (cf. Baxter, 2012). From primitivism the attitude towards the Na'vi morphs into racism, which becomes apparent in the use of such terms as "hostiles", "savages", "the natives", and "blues". Parker Selfridge, the head of the RDA on Pandora, articulates this underlying racism when he calls them "blue monkeys", and describes the clan of the Omaticaya in pestilential terms as "fly-bitten savages that live in a tree" (Avatar Wiki, n.d.).

This last racist slur, also returns to the idea of Indigenous people being viewed as part of the landscape – in this case the tropical jungle and its giant trees. Here the Na'vi are denigrated as decrepit primitives subsisting within a primeval landscape. However, the film mostly portrays the Na'vi in the trope of the noble savage 'at one with nature'. The imagery of this second trope is particularly striking when it becomes evident that Dr Grace Augustine, a xenobotanist, carries out the major field work to understand the Na'vi hominoids at the same time as the biology of the planet's flora. Furthermore, Dr Norm Spellman, the affable anthropologist and xenolinguist, is first introduced to the botany of Pandora.¹¹ The Na'vi are considered so much a part of the landscape that

¹⁰ Carib is also the root of the English word cannibal, a trope that has long served the Western imagination of primitivism.

¹¹ This aspect of the film brings up two interesting points. Firstly, in the colonial period indigenous peoples were studied along with flora and fauna (it was only later that anthropology was instituted); secondly, many contemporary anthropologists are concerned with the study of the entanglements of nature and culture – from both western and indigenous science perspectives. This is particularly important in the context of decolonisation and climate crisis in the tropics (see Chao & Enari, 2021).

they are studied in the context of plants.¹² Certainly, the physical characteristics of the Na'vi bring them close to the exotic flora and fauna of Pandora.

The indigenous Na'vi (*Homo pandorus*) are, like the other flora and fauna, gigantic.¹³ On average, they are 3 meters tall. Although they are the only known extraterrestrial species to be sapient like humans, they also bare animalistic, especially feline, qualities. Their smooth, cyan-coloured skin is accented by darker cyan stripes and bioluminescent markings which follow the nervous system and aid in identification and mood display. Their long tails, ending in a bob of fur, aid in balance.¹⁴ They have triangular shaped faces with pointed ears, pronounced canine teeth, flat bifurcated noses and large amber eyes. They have hair on their heads which forms into a long braid that protects a neural queue which protrudes from the base of their skulls. This bundle of nerve endings allows the Na'vi to connect with each other, with the flora and fauna, and the planetary emanations of their goddess Eywa. In the Na'vi language it is called tsaheylu,¹⁵ meaning, the bond. It also allows them to connect with their mounts – direhorse or banshee – to move as one (Wilhelm & Mathison, 2009; Pandorapedia, n.d.).

Thus, the film connotes that although the Na'vi are hunter-gatherers with primitive technology of bows and arrows and a reliance on only animals for mobility, they have developed a sophisticated culture based on a profound spiritual connection to all life on Pandora. This romanticised vision of Indigenous people, although certainly evocative of the deep nature-culture entanglements of Indigenous ontology, is nevertheless also entangled with classificatory systems based on notions of social evolution. Essentially this is to see humans on a developmental trajectory with Westerners at the apex, similar to the illustrations depicted in colonial evolutionary trees (European oak trees were often depicted), with their bifurcating branches and a picture of a white man on the top branch.

Thus, while *Avatar* offers the viewer a reflection on tropicality, and displays the concept's dense entanglements, and its concern with deforestation, neocolonialism, extractivism, and ethnocide, the film has rightfully come under critique for its portrayal of a white hero who saves the technologically fragile indigenous people. And yet this critique may already be open to a rereading – especially in this time of climate crisis –

¹² The director and producer of *Avatar* are well aware of anthropology. The cultural anthropologist, Nancy Lutkehaus, was invited to the studios during filming in 2008 as a consultant with experience of 'primitive' tribes (Lutkehaus, 2009). Lutkehaus's fieldwork is in Melanesia, Oceania, and more recently in Kenya, Africa.

¹³ On the tropes of miniature and gigantic in literature, and their importance in nature images see Sodikoff (2021).

¹⁴ In an interesting study, Daniela Vávrová, a creative visual anthropologist and co-founder of The Anthropological Laboratory for Tropical Audiovisual Research ([ALTAR](#)), screened *Avatar* during fieldwork among the Karawari-speaking people of Papua New Guinea. They were very perturbed by the Na'vi having tails. See 'Cinema in the Bush' (2014).

¹⁵ The Na'vi language was created by a linguistic anthropologist for the film. Na'vi was originally inspired by the Indigenous languages of the Pacific (especially Moari) and based on the grammar of Polynesian languages.

for in the film's climax it is not the white man, but rather the moon Pandora,¹⁶ or nature herself, that overcomes the colonizing humans.

Another critique can be directed at the terrestrial bias depicted throughout the film's tropical landscapes, which reveals an inherent Western continentalist view. The seas and oceans, according to this land-based perspective become the edge of empire, useful for journeying across to seek foreign shores, but rarely contemplated as seascapes. Many non-western cultures, for instance, those of the Pacific Ocean, have strong connections with the sea; while nations such as the Philippines, Indonesia and the Caribbean, are inherently archipelagic. In this regard, Édouard Glissant's archipelagic consciousness is pertinent. Glissant explores the spaces of interrelations of exchange across the seascapes and landscapes of the Caribbean involving plants, peoples, places, languages, cultures (Lundberg, et al., 2021, p. 24). However, this archipelago imaginary begins with a rhizomatic plant.

Rhizomatic-Archipelagic Imaginaries

In his famous work, *Poetics of Relation* (1990/1997), by placing emphasis on circuits of relation, Glissant rejects the stable or monolithic reading of space which ignores the spiritual density of (Caribbean) experience. Glissant conceptualises the wounds of history as a fissure or opening which unites humankind and nature in a secret bond. His poetics of landscape borrows Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notion of rhizomatics (1980/1987). According to Glissant, "Rhizomatic thought is the principle behind what I call the Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other" (p.11).

Rhizomatics is particularly evocative of the nature-culture-spiritual entanglement as understood through Caribbean cosmologies, and envisioned in *Avatar*. Furthermore, rhizomatics seems particularly evocative of the tropics and its flora. While Glissant uses the mangroves as a rhizome image, other rhizomes are likewise as tropical: ginger, turmeric, sympodial orchids, pitcher plants.

Rhizomatic imaginaries are ways of thinking beyond the hierarchal tree image that is the root of Western ways of knowing:

The root system of rhizomes forms horizontal networks in which nodes of the root may spread out in any direction.... If cut from its root network and replanted, a node will continue to grow – forming a new root network and sprouting forth a plant...for there is no origin or

¹⁶ This is, of course, based on ideas of the Gaia hypothesis. In turn, the use of Gaia (conceived in the Western tradition) to equate with Indigenous knowledge, has begun to come under serious critique – especially within the fields of new materialism, the ontological turn, and posthumanism. See *eTropic* CFP for the upcoming Special Issue on *Tropical Materialisms* <https://journals.jcu.edu.au/etropic/announcement>

hierarchy in the rhizome: every node holds the potential to connect and expand, to start anew (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Lundberg, 2013). In Deleuze and Guattari's work, the horizontal and pliable network image of rhizomes is juxtaposed to the rigid hierarchical image of the tree with its deep penetrating roots, upright trunk and radial branches – the arboreal image upon which traditional Western philosophy bases notions of evolution, development, progress, and knowledge; the same ideals that strongly underpinned colonialism. (Lundberg et al., p. 2)

This is not to suggest that rhizomatic thought is anti-tree. “The tropical banyan tree, with its spreading branches that drop down tendrils to the ground, which sprout roots to form new trunks that then branch out to create an expansive network of a tree, is an especially poignant rhizomatic image” (Lundberg, 2019, p.3). Rhizomatics is likewise evident in the Na'vi Hometree, and the expansive nature-culture entanglements of Pandora.

The spiritual life of the Na'vi hinges on their ability to communicate with their ancestors through a physical and spiritual communion with the Tree of Souls. The human scientists observe this phenomenon as an electro-chemical communication between the trees, and assert that Pandora is a global network to which the Na'vi have access. In preparation for the film's final battle between the Na'vi and the colonisers, Jake Sully, having been initiated into the Omatikaya clan and the world of Pandora, prays to the all-hearing 'All Mother' of the Na'vi religion to help him and the Na'vi battle the colonists. This prayer is answered when nature rises up and the very fauna of Pandora come to aid the Na'vi in the film's epic showdown. Thus Jake's activism is enabled by cosmological and symbiotic connections. The notion of symbiosis is earlier evoked in Grace's unveiling of the scientific basis for the Na'vi worship of Eywa:

What we think we know is that there's some kind of electro-chemical communication between the roots of the trees, like the synapses between neurons. And each tree has ten to the fourth *connections* to the trees around it. And there are ten to the twelve trees on Pandora.... It's more connections than the human brain. Get it? It's a network. It's a global network and the Na'vi can access it, they can upload and download data. (Emphasis added, Cameron, 2009)

The site Grace refers to is the Tree of Voices, under which the Na'vi are buried so their memories can be absorbed into a wider organic, spiritual network. Of equal significance is the Na'vis' long braid of hair which protects the neural queue through which they form *tsaheylu*, the bond that connects with other lifeforms. Even the seeds of the Tree of Souls are part of this linkage as they operate on a windborne sentience.

The seeds – which resemble elegant airborne jellyfish – are considered to be sacred spirits, and bearers of omens.¹⁷ They are often found in places of mythological significance, and during the death ritual a seed is buried with the body of the deceased so their consciousness will become part of the environment, which is itself inspirited (Cameron, 2009). These interrelations between different organisms and lifeforms are likewise implicit in the image of the rhizome.

Through rhizomatics we are able to map a nexus of history, epistemologies, politics and alternative ways of being which are indelibly poetic and ecological in character. Similarly, *Avatar* presents an array of ecological metaphors to think through. The Na'vis' traditions of ancestral faith, mysticism and divinity rehearse the observations of Elizabeth DeLoughrey and Wilson Harris whose ideas of living landscapes persist via a radical form and aesthetics through which "seeds of reform and activism" are planted (Regis, 2020, p. 1). This is achieved "through a spatializing of realms and time, unfettered by monolithic ideologies and linearity, to posit a reliance on a spirit-infused universe" (Regis, 2020, p. 10).

In his conceptually insightful essay "Tradition and the West Indian Novel", the Guyanese writer, Wilson Harris, prescribed what he called a "vision of [Caribbean] consciousness" (Harris, 1967, p. 32). Harris's passion for the Caribbean natural world was deeply rooted in the exceptional range and richness of the region's tropical rainforests and mountains. This remarkable terrestrial biodiversity, which includes a plethora of insects, indigenous animals and a variety of vegetation, appear in many of Harris's creative writings. As a land surveyor, he could monitor the precipitous mountains dominating the primeval landscape surrounding the Guyana hinterlands: the massive waterfalls, the abundant trees with their buttress-like roots, and the proliferation of ferns, and orchids sharing the forest with myriad other species.

Politically, Harris, like many Caribbean critical thinkers turned to literature as a social tool to contour the archipelago's geological features and island biogeography, and intellectualise the ways in which nature is twinned to the human world. Harris implored Caribbean and postcolonial writers to reject realism which cannot account for the complex tapestry of Caribbean experience with its mythical beginnings and endings. This psychic relationality and mythic depth indeed resonate with *Avatar*, which significantly opens with a dream of flying. This dream is eventually fulfilled when Jake Sully passes his initiation test by becoming an Ikran Makto (a mountain banshee rider) and later a fabled Toruk Makto.¹⁸ The fluid perception of time, which is enabled through the trope of dreaming is connected intimately to the Na'vis' sense of place in the rainforest. There is no sharp boundary between dream time and the world's time in

¹⁷ As many seeds came to rest on Jake, Neytiri believed that it could be an omen from Eywa, and thus took Jake to the clan Hometree.

¹⁸ A Toruk Makto bonds with and rides the great Toruk. Toruk Makto is a legendary and mythological hero who leads the Na'vi to victory during times of "great sorrow" (Wilhelm & Mathison, 2009, p.78).

Pandora. Harris formulates this sense of relationality into a conceptual paradigm which he envisions as a discourse of "fulfillment" (Harris, 1967, p. 28) and which he uses to resist colonialist versions of history.

The landscapes of relations envisioned through rhizomatics are extensive and they connect people with their environments and with each other across time and space. Contrary to the Western view of indigenous and ethnic identities as settled, congealed and the source of inter-group conflicts among war-like savages, people with diverse cultures coexisted across extensive landscapes and waterscapes.

In Australia, from the wet tropics to the desert, the Songlines of Indigenous Australians create networks across the land, sky and sea. They map geographical and astronomical elements from creation stories as they follow the creator-beings of the Dreaming. Songlines describe how the landscapes and waterways were shaped, they connect Indigenous Australians to land, rocks, animals, trees, water; and different Aboriginal nations to each other. Where a Songline ends, another begins, creating an oral map and a form of communication that spans the continent. They are existential to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (see Glowczewski, 2022).

In West Africa's great Niger Delta, the sharing of a common aqueous environment inundated by floods and tropical storms engendered similar cultural customs. Rather than separate peoples, the waterways of the Delta created cultural convergences (Anderson & Peek, 2002). Thus, the history of the Delta is not one of distinct and hostile ethnic groups. Significant levels of interactions, hostile and peaceful, took place among groups. Continuous contact "between contiguous groups produced broad zones of culturally and sometimes linguistically mixed communities rather than sharply delimited frontiers" (Northrup, 1978, p. 47).

Like Songlines and Deltaic waterways, Glissant's mangrove rhizome is a network connecting air and land with the sea. His oeuvre further allows for an archipelagic thinking in which he draws together "relations between the islands and the peoples of the Caribbean, and their exchanges with other places, cultures, identities and poetics or imaginaries" (Columbie, 2021, p.79). The Cuban writer Antonio Benítez Rojo described the Caribbean as a "meta-archipelagic text, a confluence of marine flowings..." (Benítez Rojo, 1996, p. 16; Columbie, 2021, p.79). And this rhizomatic-archipelagic imaginary, which counters Western hierarchical trees and continent-bound epistemologies, also extends to other tropical archipelagos – including the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia (Carter, 2013).

Yet, as with tropical rainforest landscapes of Earth and Pandora, tropical archipelagos with their panoramic island seascapes became a space of colonisation and destruction. It is thus timely that *Avatar 2* is set in the sea. We look forward to viewing

and critiquing the sequel to *Avatar*, which is located primarily in and around the Pandora Ocean and introduces a new clan of tropical reef-dwelling Na'vi. The director James Cameron is an advocate of ocean conservation and the film will repeat the tale of neo-colonial exploitation with a moral imperative to save the oceans. At the same time, the film is also likely to repeat motifs of tropicality and exoticism, now set within oceanic environments.

Thus, while the movie *Avatar* was based on a notion of Edenic paradise – as James Cameron pronounced: “It's kinda the Garden of Eden with teeth and claws” (Avatar Wiki, n.p.); the upcoming sequel extends tropicality to blue and marine environments, seascapes and islandscapes. The producer Jon Landau has described the tropical beaches and shores of this revisited Pandora as a seaside paradise: “Bora Bora on steroids” (Coggan, 2021). Such tropical imaginaries offer continued sites of analysis for thinkers writing in the traditions of tropicality.

The conceptual art for *Avatar 2* already awakens our imagination, for in this image we see massive mangroves with their rhizomatic roots connecting with an archipelagic sea of islands. This panorama is exotic, yet immediately recognisable. This artistic rendering invokes biogeographic imaginaries of tropical archipelagos. The panorama resonates with Raja Ampat in Indonesia, the site of Earth's richest coral reefs, of mangroves, and karst islands, of rainforests, and indigenous people – and their delicate nature-culture entanglements.

Figure 1. *Avatar 2* Panorama (rhizomatic mangroves and archipelagos)



Official Avatar 2 concept art

Tropical Landscapes and Nature-Culture Entanglements

Through a close reading of *Avatar* we have aimed to show how a landscape's physicality is entwined with layers of human meaning and value – and how tropical landscapes have particular cultural values that can be analysed through the concept of tropicity. In the papers brought together in this Special Issue collection, the authors take us to other tropical landscapes and seascapes to interrogate their nature-culture entanglements through various cultural, disciplinary and theoretical lenses. We have grouped the collection of papers in small archipelagos as they move between and across the seas of disciplines and tropical geographies.

Geophilosophy

The first paper stands as an island in a sea of connections to this introduction's theorisation of tropicity and rhizomatics. The first paper takes us to Kashmir and the realms of geophilosophy, geopolitics and the new notion of geo-tropicity.

In "Earth(ing) Kashmir: Geo-Tropicity as a Means of Thinking beyond Stratified Geopolitics," Saswat Samay Das, Abhisek Ghosal and Ananya Roy Pratihari begin their paper by asserting that "Kashmir's tropicity radically subverts the popular notion of tropical landscapes" (p. 29). The country consists of a variety of climates according to its various geological landforms and altitudes which turn Kashmir's geo-tropicity into a chaotic universe, an immanent rhizosphere. Like the terrain, Kashmir's history is scoured in "violent rifts, fractures and discontinuities" (p.33), including the current geopolitics of identity struggles and decolonisation. The authors argue the need for *earthing* Kashmir in terms of its dynamic becoming.

Cultural Heritage

This archipelago of papers revolves around heritage and moves over archaeology, history, and architecture. It includes material cultures of ancient civilisations, fortifications, houses, gardens, and specific plants. We are invited into the tropics of Zimbabwe, of Haiti, and the Indonesian Islands of Banda and Sulawesi.

Ashton Sinamai, in "*Ivhu rinotsamwa: Landscape Memory and Cultural Landscapes in Zimbabwe and Tropical Africa*", argues that the legacy of colonialism and neo-colonial global politics continues to determine the types of knowledge, and direct the flows of knowledge, in archaeology, material anthropology, and heritage theories and practices. Thus, perceptions of cultural landscapes of tropical Africa continue to be overdetermined by western philosophies, while local knowledge is considered merely supplementary, or irrational. Sinamai titles his paper with the Shona term *ivhu*

rinotsamwa, and its meaning “the land will get angry at us” (p. 52) frames his analysis of the importance of understanding how landscape shapes culture. This indigenous viewpoint is explored through the important heritage site of Great Zimbabwe.

LeGrace Benson’s paper, “Staging Eden; Staging Power: Landscaping the Royal Garden of the Kingdom of Haiti”, takes us to newly liberated Haiti. After the successful slave revolt, self-proclaimed King Henry (Christophe) I, embarked on a campaign to build a landscaped tropical ‘garden of Eden’, that would demonstrate the power and knowledge of the new Kingdom of Haiti. Henry Christophe’s use of Taíno, African and European knowledge systems and the planting of indigenous and foreign flora, went into creating the luxuriant tropical Jardin Royale, as well as the Palais Sans Souci, and the Citadelle on the summit of the Pic Laferrière. However, beyond the royal garden and the preserved forest, exploitation of the ecosystem continued along with thriving plantations.

Frank Dhont’s research moves us to Indonesia and the tiny archipelago of the Banda Islands with its history based on one spice. In “Of Nutmeg and Forts: Indonesian Pride in the Banda Islands’ Unique Natural and Cultural Landscape”, Dhont explores the island’s tropical biogeographic features which made it the sole location of nutmeg in the world, and how this led to a history of indigenous production and trade, and later to Dutch colonial conquest, with ensuing fortifications, plantations, slavery, and the genocide and exiling of the indigenous people. That some Bandarese were able to return to the island to reinvigorate their culture is attributed to their embracing of inclusive identity. Banda “was once the home to one of the archipelago’s proudest and most powerful civilizations” (p.84), that pride is now displayed in their heritage, which incorporates the islands and surrounding seas, their nutmeg, and the colonial fortresses which remain as sentinel reminders of the dark era of colonisation.

Octaviana Rombe, Hong Ching Goh and Zuraini Md. Ali guide us to the highlands of Toraja on the island of Sulawesi. Their paper, “Toraja Cultural Landscape: *Tongkonan* Vernacular Architecture and Toraja Coffee Culture”, is based on a revised ethnographic approach combining fieldwork and virtual observation through photographs and video coupled with photo-elicitation interviews, accompanied by archival research into cultural heritage. As the authors point out, Toraja is noted for its remarkable *Rambu Solo* (unique funeral ceremony), its traditional vernacular architecture of *Tongkonan* houses, and its exceptional coffee. “However, people do not realize that each of these aspects are an integral part of a cultural ecology” (p. 100). The paper explores the relations between culture, architecture and coffee cultivation to demonstrate how the *Tongkonan* house is an essential element in Torajan cultural landscape and coffee culture which forms a unique cultural heritage.

Anthropology

The third grouping of papers revolves around anthropology and the move within this discipline to study the deep entanglements of cultural beliefs and practices with nature. The first two papers analyse documentary film and ethnographic landscapes of the plantationocene. This is followed by a piece on Chinese historical anthropology and landscapes of miasma. We are also introduced, via the fandango, to ethnomusicology and photographic documentation. These papers travel from the island of Papua, further into Indonesia and Malaysia, across to Yunnan in Southern China, and to the Sotavento region in Mexico.

Hatib Abdul Kadir undertakes a film ethnography of oil palm plantations in Papua, Indonesia. In “Women’s Grievances and Land Dispossession: Reading Landscapes through Papuan Independent Films”, Kadir, through a selection of short documentary films produced by Papuan filmmakers, demonstrates how indigenous women depend on forests and gardens in order to maintain a social-economic role in the community and practice care and reciprocity. Importantly the forests and their flora and fauna are kin. Papuans are literally in relation with their environment. Deforestation and large-scale oil palm plantations threaten both ecology and the role of women. As Kadir notes, films by Papuans, “reveal the struggle by indigenous women for access to their land – in a region well known for land dispossession” (p. 149).

Sophie Chao takes us deeper into the monoculture plantations of Southeast Asia, with emphasis on Malaysia and Indonesia. The title of her paper, “(Un)Worlding the Plantationocene: Extraction, Extinction, Emergence”, sets the parameters of her rigorous interdisciplinary theoretical-ethnographic investigation. The subject of her analysis is “one of the tropics’ most rapidly growing and controversial agribusiness industries – the palm oil sector” (p.167). And she sets out to track how “multispecies worlds in the Plantationocene are made, unmade, and remade through entangled processes of more-than-human extraction, extinction, and emergence” (p.166). Extraction includes substance, land, and labour. Extinction under plantation monologic is that of multispecies communities. Yet there is also emergence where “diverse plants, animals, and fungi are learning to co-exist with oil palm in new forms of symbiosis” (p.3).

Qieyi Liu, in ‘Dai in the “Land of Tropical Miasma”: Encounters of Early Chinese Anthropology in Yunnan’ analyses how historically the tropical borderlands of China-Burma and their indigenous peoples, were depicted in binary imaginaries as either tropical diseased landscape in need of social engineering; or as a fertile haven supporting harmonious societies. The new discipline of anthropology played a part in these understandings as it changed the Dai, regarded by the dominant Han ethnic group as marginal tribes living in a land of tropical miasma, into a subject of

ethnographic investigation. Liu's paper is set at the time of the newly forming Republic of China and the incorporation of border peoples, along with academic disciplines, was a component in the creation of nation and Chinese identity. She further argues that "the politics of knowledge was likewise consequential upon the material transformation of landscapes and their nature-culture entanglements" (p.195).

The opening scene of J.A. Strub and Abraham (Bosque) Ávila Quintero's paper states: "We found each other at one in the morning in the middle of a *fandango*" (p. 219) and thus begins their collaborative project "Portraits-in-Place from the Sotavento: A Photo-Dialogue between Abraham Bosque and J.A. Strub". The photo-dialogue depicts eleven photographic works of 'Bosque' which are the starting points for the ensuing discussions between the authors regarding the challenges of portraying the tropical region of the Sotavento in Mexico – whose very fecundity is the incentive for its extractivist plunder. Interspersed throughout the paper are descriptions of the ethnomusical tradition of *son jarocho*, which is an inherent part of local culture, and rich ethnographic descriptions of the author's in dialogue.

Literature

This archipelago of papers moves us into the realm of literature and crosses into Brazilian, Indian and Pacific territories. The genres are complex as the writers engage in an eco-gothic poetics, travel writing/memoir, postcolonial literature, ecofeminism, climate fiction, and ecocriticism. Here we encounter landscapes of the savannah and of political revolution, of malaria, of the feminine psyche, and then enter into the rising seas of Anthropocene, before journeying back in time to an era of Southseas literature.

André Vasquez Vital and Sandro Dutra e Silva interrogate discursive representations of climatic seasonality in the short stories *Dias de Chuva* and *Gente da Gleba*. In their paper entitled, "Darkness in the Seasonal Savannah: The Brazilian Cerrado in Stories by Hugo de Carvalho Ramos", the authors consider how the fundamental colours of blue and red operate as key tones embedded in the humid summers and dry winters. The authors understand landscape as the "convergence of an experienced, lived moment, a totality in motion that materially traverses and constrains those within it with fundamental hues and colours that evade the purely representational universe" (p.240). They propose that futuristic expectations move in tandem with the rainy season and are related with forms of renewal and dissolution. Human community is also constrained by fear of the ferocious dry season with its threat of fires. Colours "produce certain specific emotions" to emphasise "a landscape-feeling" (p.242). This human-nature entanglement is spatialised in a manner of gothic literature, which enables new understandings of the anxieties that spin around climatic seasonality.

Nicolle Jordan's article "Maria Graham's Tropical Landscaping of Brazilian Independence", argues that in the 1824 memoir of her travels the genteel Scottish woman used landscape to accentuate the political changes she witnessed during the Brazilian independence movement. In a close reading of the memoir, Jordan carefully maps and articulates how Maria Graham situates British landscape aesthetics and discourse within the foreign location of Portuguese South America, and the radical political context of revolution. Jordan highlights how Graham: "as a writer and amateur artist and botanist...bears witness to both the natural and political 'wonders' of Brazil, and interprets and intertwines them in sometimes dazzling ways, both visually and verbally" (p.260). Here nature and politics become entwined through landscape aesthetics. As Jordan states: "By demonstrating how British landscape aesthetics migrated beyond British borders and assimilated Brazil's tropical biodiversity, she gives this aesthetic an imperialist inflection that perpetuates the longstanding assumption that certain kinds of landscapes (Britain's, and now also Brazil's) accommodate and indeed necessitate political liberty" (p.260).

Priscilla Jolly provides a rigorous commentary in "Tropical Topographies: Mapping the Malarial in *The Calcutta Chromosome*" where she argues that Amitav Ghosh's futuristic medical thriller *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995) resists colonial strategies of mapping and disease control. Jolly contends that the novel presents an alternative endeavour to those of colonial discourses by decentring the malarial history of Sir Roland Ross's memoir and other writings, and instead placing two subaltern subjects, Murugan and Mangala, at the core of new mapping practices. Through transgressing "the narrative of improvement driven by anthropocentric will" (p. 302), Jolly reads the ways in which Ghosh engages the mobilities of peripheral actors such as the mosquito and the religious sect (lead by Mangala), each epitomizing guerrilla ecologies that resist colonial epistemologies.

Prachi Priyanka in "Ecofeminist Landscapes in Anita Desai's *Cry, The Peacock* and *Where Shall We Go This Summer*" undertakes a close reading of the two novels in order to explore the environmental landscapes of the tropical Indian settings and the psychological landscapes of the central characters. The novels reveal the anguish of the female protagonists who suffer a sense of loss in an oppressive patriarchal system in which they cannot express themselves. The novels draw extensively on nature images in the articulation of the central characters psychological worlds. As Priyanka explains regarding the oeuvre of Anita Desai: "The language of interconnection in her writings evokes emotions that reintegrate human existence with the natural environment. As a result, humans in her novels are part of the ecosystem, rather than being discreet identities merely projected onto an environmental panorama. Her two novels...examined from an ecofeminist perspective, highlight the natural, cultural and psychic landscapes observed in her writings" (p. 307).

Trina Bose and Punyashree Panda's, "Pacific Seascapes of the Anthropocene: Changing Human-Nature Relationships in Jeff Murray's *Melt*" depicts how Murray's climate fiction novel illuminates the Anthropocenic disembowelment and radical alteration of the earth and sea. Following the plight of Pacific Islanders whose low lying island is decimated by storms and sea level rise, their essay centres on the disruption in human-nature connections for Pacific peoples and the adjustments that civilisations will have to make in the wake of anthropogenic climate change. Moreover, Bose and Panda show how the near future cli-fi novel *Melt* uncovers the disparities that stay connected to colonial pasts and which resurge in neo-colonial prospects. The novel *Melt* is a cautionary tale that demonstrates how the Anthropocene wreaks "irrevocable and detrimental climatological changes" on the human and natural world (p. 343), the ramifications of which include intensified atmospheric phenomenon, rapidly rising sea levels, climate migrations and refugees.

Denise Dillon examines a cross-section of literary representations of seascapes including the works of Melville, Stevenson, Becke and Conrad to record the interface between aspects of being and existence of life at sea and "in the edge zones where ocean meets island shore" (p. 351). In, "Wilderness in 19th Century South Seas Literature: An Ecocritical Search for Seascapes" Dillon argues that there is a terrestrial bias in Western thought and literature and in the conception of the notion of wilderness. Drawing together psychology, and other social sciences, with ecocritical theory, and a close reading of nineteenth century South Seas literature, she undertakes a reconceptualisation of oceanic wilderness as spaces through which new modalities of freedom, negotiation and transcendence can be gleaned.

Poetry

The final two papers in this collection offer poetic landscapes as sites of literary exposure and resistance to colonialism and contemporary exploitation and degradation. The poems are infused with the landscapes from which they arise, the Philippine Archipelago, and a Hindu pilgrimage site at the foothills of the Himalayas.

Jeffrey B. Javier in "Pornotopia" responds to the notion of "porno-tropics". He unpacks ideas of desire, enticement and fantasies in relation to a series of verses. Javier connects the creative relationship between submerged, sexual, and explicit desires with ideas of territorial plunder and the myth of the earth as feminised body. Through a metaphoric engagement with violent facts of colonial conquest and the topography of sex and voyeurism, Javier engages the yearnings for territory take-over, while wielding a resistant modality and inflection to contest hegemonic forces.

Srinjay Chakravarti's, "Hrishikesh: A Poem on Corrupted Landscape" reflects upon Hrishikesh, a Hindu pilgrimage centre, set in a subtropical valley at the foothills of the

great Himalayas, in the biodiverse Uttarakhand state. The poem explores the degradation of the site's cultural, religious and natural landscapes. Modernity and technologism, mass consumption and yoga tourism, result in contamination, defilement and ecological debasement. These consequences include poisonous effluents and trash dumped into the sacred Ganges River.

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