



Book review

Malcom Ferdinand, *Decolonial Ecology: Thinking from the Caribbean World*. Cambridge:

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Missing dialogue and fractures between the environmentalist and anti-colonial movements are commonly cited issues in building meaningful shared narratives and praxis across these struggles. Fragmentation between various camps of critical social theorists and activist movements have erected barriers to collective mobilisation around social and environmental justice. A broad catalogue of decolonial literature and environmental justice movements opposing extractivism and neo-colonial arrangements have provided models and strategies for ending global patterns of coloniality. Yet, there are still few meaningful links between environmentalist/ecology movements in the Global North and anti-colonial movements in both the North and South. Herein lies the fracture that Malcom Ferdinand's *Decolonial Ecology* attempts to address.

Ferdinand's thesis revolves around the *problématique* of what he terms the '*colonial and environmental double fracture of modernity*'. He suggests that there exists a pathway to connection between the hitherto disparate camps of the ecological and anti-colonial movement. The pathway, he claims, is a shared recognition of the 'double fracture of modernity' across both movements; a shared narrative where, in Ferdinand's words, 'different actors recognize a common history'. The colonial fracture constitutes Western value systems and scales of valorisation that produce unjust hierarchies and intersecting systems of oppression that places the racialised, non-Christian men and women in a position of subordination to White, educated males. The environmental fracture refers to the humanity–nature dualism that places Man, *Anthropos*, above nature. Ferdinand cites and critiques more conventional symptoms of this dualism, namely technocratic environmentalism, whilst also including the 'solitary walker'. This 'solitary walker' category includes the likes of Thoreau, Rousseau and Muir who are criticised for reinforcing the environmental double fracture through their adulation of a virgin 'Nature'. Yet the most emboldening and emancipatory contribution of Ferdinand's work lies in his analysis of the divide between the modern anti-colonial movements and the ecological and environmentalist movement, coupled with his prognosis on how to *heal* this double fracture of modernity through various means.

Having grown up in Martinique, Ferdinand's positionality defines the text and its method of inquiry. He frames the Caribbean as the nexus for beginning an enquiry into the genealogy of the double fracture, suggesting it emerged in the Caribbean context. In doing so, Ferdinand places Caribbean voices at the centre of an emerging discourse

between ecological and anti-racist/postcolonial movements. Ferdinand's highly semantic style echoes the voice of Aimé Césaire, whose themes and metaphors are weaved into this text. It would not be overstating Ferdinand's work to suggest *Decolonial Ecology* provides a 21st century, ecologically framed update to *Discourses on Colonialism*, building on Césaire's call for pluralism, encountering and reconciliation through shared world-building, and discourse, for as Césaire states – 'exchange is oxygen' (Césaire, 2001).

By acknowledging the strong influence of Césaire amongst Ferdinand's many other influences, I don't wish to detract from the originality of this work. Ferdinand's work provides a completely novel taxonomy for constructing shared conceptual frames across social movements, building narratives that encompass shared histories and experiences to provide a platform with which to build a unified yet diverse politics of liberation. Overall, Ferdinand's work is broadly infallible and an essential, vital contribution to the field of political ecology, the field's own decolonisation and decolonial thought more broadly. A few of Ferdinand's prognoses were nevertheless left underdeveloped in the latter stages of the book, and a more precise turn to and analysis of the characteristics of late modern capitalism would have been welcome.

The book is divided into four sections. The first section is a thorough diagnosis of the 'colonial fracture' as told from the perspective of the Caribbean world and in its own terms. The book reaches an analytical crescendo in the first chapter, supplying a core claim of the book, with Ferdinand diagnosing 'colonial inhabitation' as the key defining feature of modernity and its contribution to colonality and, as he later shows, ecological destruction. The turn to geographical and resource 'inhabitation' coupled with the 'othercide' present in this inhabitation is remarkable as a concept in its ability to span modernity in its entirety. In the section Ferdinand offers striking and precise examples from 15th to 18th century Caribbean colonial inhabitation. The concept can be easily extrapolated to include the invisibilised commodity frontiers of 21st-century capitalism. These frontiers inhabit spaces on the pretence of extraction, whilst performing 'othercide' through the enduring project of the export of liberal, enlightenment values, which if rejected are still forced upon others with violence. The key triumph of Ferdinand's work is his ability to form this tangible and convincing link between the experiences of both the colonised and colonisers of modernity's genesis and its current state through conceptual frames such as 'colonial inhabitation'.

Ferdinand's diagnosis goes on to introduce the 'plantationocene' as a new proposal for the epoch the world finds itself in. This is followed by the 'negrocene' and 'hold politics' as more specific proposals for understanding the state inflicted on the colonised. The particularly compelling articulation of 'loss-bodies' and the 'refusal of the world' to colonised peoples provides a novel frame for understanding alienation within modernity and in the context of colonialism. Study concerning the cultural, economic and social legacy of colonialism has hitherto had a heavy focus on, to borrow Quijano's term, the 'coloniality of power' brought about by colonialism, which emphasises both the physical colonisation and dispossession taking place, alongside the repression of modes of thought and knowledge through the imposition of ways of knowing (Quijano, 2007). Ferdinand recognises the pertinency of these material and social dispossessions of colonialism, whilst also dedicating careful and purposeful time to insisting on the ecological

alienation imparted through colonialism and slavery. The book successfully grounds itself in perspectives from the Caribbean, whilst managing to form concepts from these perspectives that may speak to the experiences of oppressed peoples and non-humans impacted by coloniality beyond those affected directly by the Atlantic Slave Trade. The ‘Negrocene’ is an example of Ferdinand’s attempt to carefully unite groups of people under a shared understanding that does not subordinate the struggles of one group to a narrative of another. Whether such nomenclature would be accepted as capturing the experience of *every* subordinated group in the world, such as those who lie outside the historical scope of European imperialism, like those embedded within caste relations in India, is unclear. Whether terms such as ‘Negrocene’ and ‘Plantationocene’ form one part of a tapestry of devices usable for shared world-building or whether they do speak to a very broad array of peoples would have to be a discussion for the groups themselves.

In the second section, Ferdinand turns to the environmental fracture, where he offers a robust critique of hegemonic, Western environmentalism. Here Ferdinand is referring to Western environmentalism and its emphasis on ‘conservation’, often realised through national parks and/or reserves. Ferdinand, like many others, suggests these policies stem from humanity–nature dualisms and visions of nature as Eden, ‘virgin’, something ‘out-there’ or heterotopic. Yet, Ferdinand’s originality and creativity in his proposals for naming these actors in his five ‘figures of Noah’s Ark’ provide apt metaphors that will no doubt be useful to authors and activists in providing new ways of constructing narratives that may bridge social movements. This section contains provoking examples from Puerto Rico, Haiti and Martinique, using them to claim that a key fracture between anti-colonial and environmentalist movements stems from, as Ferdinand states, ‘disassociating the fate of landscapes and ecosystems from how colonialism is understood’, as opposed to a univocal focus on the fate of colonised *peoples*. The book’s move away from anthropocentrism is also highly refreshing and bold within the field. This approach is carefully maintained as an integral aspect of the inquiry rather than as a throwaway bolt-on that regularly leaves many works of political ecology ending with a whimper.

In the third section, Ferdinand outlines the historical responses that have occurred to the fractures outlined previously, their deficiencies and promises. Ferdinand’s turn to both maroon ecologies as a subversive response to slaving in the Caribbean and the ‘Wandering man’ of Rousseau, Muir and Thoreau as a response to the alienation from nature following the Industrial Revolution convincingly illuminates the depth of the double fracture. Ferdinand’s critique of ‘Maroon ecology’s’ lack of effect on society more broadly and of the ‘Wandering Man’s’ lack of engagement with coloniality are well-argued. However, the section’s strength lies in showing that there exists precedent upon which to build a decolonial ecology. This is shown in the example of Maroon ‘matrigenesis’ and Thoreau’s ‘civil marronage’. Ferdinand shows that the advancements and connections in thought required to place colonialism at the heart of the ecological crisis are not so far away. In the thirteenth chapter, Ferdinand reviews the diagnosis made in the book and establishes the theoretical conditions necessary for a decolonial ecology.

The book finishes with a reasonably compelling prognosis of a politics and strategy of reconciliation and world-building. Ferdinand’s view is that words and ideas are important nodes of power, and by addressing colonial grammar and offering an alternative grammar that is decolonial and ecological, we may begin to dismantle and reconstruct

colonial power relations. Ferdinand also does well to avoid falling into a politics of 'return'. A politics of 'return' is characterised by nostalgia for a past set of more desirable social relations, which are disturbed by an input that disrupts the former equilibrium. To avoid such a politics, he begins to emphasise a movement towards a 'horizon' (utopianism as method as opposed to a destination). In emphasising the importance of a dual, unified movement, comprised by both colonised and colonisers, he offers a novel future, not based in a former utopia, but a utopia that is yet to come. This turn to a movement towards a 'horizon' was very promising yet was, disappointingly, underdeveloped. Ferdinand's attempt to juggle and tie together opposing concepts, such as ecological self-hood and individualised, bio-political self-building is highly ambitious yet leaves something to be desired in terms of concrete answers and strategies for the age-old question of how to build a collective movement out of an assemblage of individuals. Furthermore, a turn to a more specific unpacking of certain (neo-)colonial features of late modern capitalism such as economic growth, extractivism, the imperial mode of living and developmentalism would have been welcome to provide more objects for a decolonial ecology to gather around and oppose. Having said this, I think Ferdinand's work opens up a wholly novel and exciting perspective on ecology and decolonial thought in the final section of the book. His outlining of the parameters in which a decolonial ecology might be constructed, particularly through an interspecies alliance informed by relational and/or *gestalt* ontologies will hopefully be the beginning of a growing conversation on these ideas in political ecology's broadly anthropocentric purview.

To finish, it would be remiss of me not to comment on some of the thought-provoking artwork that opens some chapters and the book itself. Turner's *Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing the Dead and Dying - Typhoon Coming On)* on the cover of *Decolonial Ecology* is so well suited to the narratives of the book that it makes you wonder whether Ferdinand reached back across time to commission Turner for his new book... Each chapter is also introduced with an account of a slave-ship operating during the Atlantic slave trade in which Ferdinand's highly emotive literary voice is on display. *Decolonial Ecology* is a personal work, that speaks from the perspective of a well-defined Caribbean World that authentically and meaningfully reaches out and touches the World at large.

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