In the field of literary studies, ecocriticism and geocriticism are currently acknowledged as the disciplines that most prominently and consistently engage with the question of human spatiality, examining the connections between ecology, geography, and fictional representations. Risen out of individual scholarly efforts grounded on the critical categories of place (as natural environment) and space (as real-and-imagined referential world), they emerged in the early 1990s and at the beginning of the twenty-first century as recognizable branches of literary investigation that bring in a variety of methodologically diverse approaches under a common subject heading and a shared theoretical framework. Given their methodological flexibility and their distinctly exploratory agenda, ecocriticism and geocriticism originate a set of critical practices that transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries—for instance, those isolating literature from other nonliterary domains, or the ones that replicate the crisscross of national frontiers—and can be informed by peculiar perspectives, such as the postcolonial angle that will be maintained and emphasized all through this chapter. In fact, postcolonialism is less an independent discipline or a fixed, unitary theory than a “wide-ranging political project”¹ that aims at
reorganizing Western fields of knowledge formation around issues of (neo)colonial and imperial domination, economic exploitation, and resource dispossession in the so-called Global South (a rather slippery, “antigeographical” label that applies to different microcosms across the North–South hemisphere divide).²

A combination of geocriticism, ecocriticism, and postcolonialism, made possible by their inherent dynamism and transdisciplinary reach, is at the grounds of my discussion. I will first venture to outline the modes of interaction between these fields—or rather “currents”—of literary criticism. I will then test the critical possibilities of the resulting integrated approach by presenting a reading of a specific region in the Indian subcontinent, the Sundarbans forest that lies southeast of Kolkata, on the Bay of Bengal. I will look at a range of fictional and nonfictional representations of the place and identify in this intertextual chain the roots of different conceptions and local practices of environmental activism.

**Postcolonializing Geocriticism**

The term “geocriticism” is frequently employed in current academic discourse as a convenient, somewhat trendy label that applies to a wide variety of literary analyses focusing on the relation between real and fictional spaces. Such broad sense is already embedded in early definitions of geocriticism as “tâtonnement,”³ an “active exploration”⁴ continually subject to improvement and change. Yet, this exploratory, thought-provoking openness is potentially turning the term into a rather unstable signifier. For the purpose of this essay, I define geocriticism more narrowly as the “science des espaces littéraires,”⁵ initially elaborated by Bertrand Westphal and his researchers at the Université de Limoges, based on a specific set of theoretical premises, with a primary object of study and an original method of analysis. Building on the question of referentiality, but avoiding the shortcomings of either a superficial conception of realism that subdues fiction to the dictates of a restrictive mimetic practice, or the reductive textualist constraints of structuralism, Westphal’s geocritical approach affirms the contiguity and connection between fiction and reality without de-emphasizing the heterogeneity and autonomy of each world. Once a single place is made into the object of inquiry, it is examined in line with four methodological tenets: multifocalization, polysensoriality, stratigraphy, and intertextuality. In short, the geocritical study of a given place takes into account its multiple and contrasting representations (literary and non-literary ones), all together acting on
In his 2007 monograph *La géocritique: réel, fiction, espace* (Paris: Minuit), Westphal establishes a close link between geocriticism and minority discourses, not least postcolonial theory; indeed, questions of space and place have always been central to postcolonial literary criticism. It is currently understood that the colonial conquest of overseas territories was preceded and sustained by a cultural process of representation and textualization of the unknown “Other,” shaped into familiar forms and reconceptualized through accepted metaphors. Against this twofold act of violence—geographical and epistemic—imposed on “Oriental Others” by European colonialism, postcolonial literature and criticism have underscored the meaning and narrative function of place, space, and landscape as a way to challenge colonial discourse and geographies and to decolonize both mind and territory. In the context of this process of reclamation, recreation, and reinscription of place and self, Westphal warns about the risk for postcolonial studies of “establishing another centric point of view, the former Other becoming an ongoing One.”6 Insisting on multifocalization as the most important aspect (along with “geocentricity”) of the geocritical methodology, he envisions the referential—“real”—world as a polysemic, protean combination of alterities. However, he largely neglects the political nature of (re)imagined geographies, and the history of colonialism and imperialism behind endogenous, exogenous, and allochthonous points of view. In fact, as Peta Mitchell and Jane Stadler remind us, “[c]ultural narratives not only mediate and represent space, place, and location, but they are themselves mediated representational spaces.”

A more straightforward engagement of geocriticism with postcolonial concerns will bring prominence to the performative function and the intrinsic ideological significance of fictional and non-fictional textual practices, which at the very least repeat, and more often than not interrogate and reshape, the discourses of colonial empires. The intertextual chain initiated by the referent, which defines the scope of any geocritical research, will be organized into coherent, often mutually conflicting *systems* of representations, taking into consideration their diachronical stratification and synchronical complexity. In addition, without losing focus on the given place, the geocentered investigation will expand its spatial compass: postcolonial place must be analyzed through the filter of displacement, bringing to light the symbolic practices by which the metropolitan centers have exercised domination over the peripheries. At the same time, the notion
of endogenous, exogenous, and allogenous perspectives must be problematized, since autochthonous representations of postcolonial space may be informed, more or less deliberately, by the ideological underpinnings of the Orientalist and imperialist hegemonic vision.

**GREENING POSTCOLONIALISM**

The accent on heterogeneity and displacement that characterizes a geocritical examination invested with a postcolonial perspective does not easily accord with ecocritical concerns. In fact, though in recent years postcolonial studies have been significantly engaging with ecocriticism, these academic fields seem to be divided by some major epistemological gaps. Rob Nixon identified four of these in his attempt to bring environmentalism into dialogue with postcolonialism: firstly, in contrast to the postcolonial focus on hybridity, ecocritics foreground preservationist discourses of purity; secondly, whereas postcolonial criticism concerns with place and displacement, ecocriticism prioritizes an exclusionary ethics of place; thirdly, the transnational interpretive framework developed by postcolonialists is replaced by ecocritics with a more patently national—often nationalistic—one; finally, the postcolonial commitment to excavating the marginalized histories inscribed in the land is minimized by ecocritics in favor of the idea of a timeless, transcendental geography. Without denying Nixon’s analysis, scholars working on postcolonial ecocriticism have been more recently trying to resist these fissures by drawing attention to areas of overlapping between the two fields. In the introduction to their collection *Postcolonial Ecologies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley point out the speculative limits of Nixon’s reflections (focused exclusively on mainstream forms of American ecocriticism, as he himself acknowledges), and note that his arguments, which elaborate on Ramachandra Guha’s 1989 important critique of radical American environmentalism, overlook later forms of ecocriticism that deviate from the “deep ecology” movement that informed early ecocritical research. They then maintain the rapprochement between postcolonialism and ecocriticism on the basis of their mutual re-energization: for example, a consideration of ecological discourses of precolonial purity enables a deeper understanding of the geographical burden of colonialism and its tangible consequences, while attention to the category of the human expands the meaning of sustainability to social as well as environmental well-being.
A very convincing proposal for overcoming the contradictions between postcolonialism and ecocriticism was advanced by Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee in 2010. Premised on a careful account of their singular trends and reciprocal overtures, Mukherjee’s contention is that such cross-fertilization should be grounded on a revision and strengthening of their unevenly built-in strains of historical materialism. The “ecomaterialist aesthetics” that he develops as a framework to the reading of the literatures and cultures of postcolonial societies stems from an engagement with the issue of representation and calls for an investigation of “the forms, shapes and contents of cultural texts that both determine and express particular relationships with their environments.”12 Sanctioning “the essential unity of humans and environment”13 and identifying labor as the keystone of the exchange between postcolonial and ecocritical positions, ecomaterialism avoids the “deep ecological” dichotomy of anthropocentrism and biocentrism. There is in fact an element of epistemological passivity in human cognitive processes—determined both by the activity of the percipient subject and by the stimuli of the external world—that leads to a kind of “‘weak’ anthropocentrism”; at the same time, what we call “nature” is not so much a physical invariant, but the result of human labor and cultural production. In sum, by materializing postcolonialism and historicizing ecocriticism, the ecomaterialist method draws equal attention to the role of human (cultural) labor and to the enabling conditions that the material environment offers to it.

If we accept Mukherjee’s understanding of postcolonial ecocriticism and consider it from a geocritical angle, we see that the ecomaterialist methodology engages with Westphal’s geocriticism in a complex, provocative way. To begin with, it problematizes the principle of geocentricity, which calls for a movement “from the writer to the place.”14 Mukherjee’s investigation of postcolonial environments unfolds over four Indian English literary texts and focuses on the specific context of contemporary India; still, it would be likely accused by “orthodox” geocritics for its ego-centered logic, on the basis of the manifest interest in the singular representational choices and literary forms adopted by the writers. Besides, the textual corpus selected is rather narrow, while, conversely, the spatial referent rather vast—even more so if we follow the suggestion to grasp postcolonial India as a globalized entity, “its condition speak[ing] simultaneously at local and global, specific and general, levels.”15 Mukherjee’s examination, then, seems at odds with the chief characteristics of geocriticism, and yet it does examine “a multiplicity of heterogeneous points of view, which all converge in a given place.”16—here, the Indian subcontinent, a broad referent that
can be compared to those general thematic entities whose analyses, in a geocritical optic, “might serve as theoretical frameworks for studies of more specific geographical referents.”

Speaking from the outside—or from the margins—of geocriticism proper, the eco-materialist method outlined by Mukherjee provides an example of the dynamic interaction among postcolonial, ecocritical, and geocritical perspectives. Consequently, it constitutes one of the conceptual premises of the joint approach to postcolonial environments that I delineate below.

**Notes toward a Postcolonial Green Geocriticism**

The kind of integrated methodology that I am suggesting—what we may call “postcolonial green geocriticism”—is articulated around the cardinal principles of the geocritical project. However, these tenets will be reshaped in order to address postcolonial and ecocritical concerns.

Westphal’s multifocal dynamic, which demands a multiplication of viewpoints on a given place, is little interested in the individual perspective of the authors and in the discursive strategies of spatial representation, but when postcolonial considerations are brought to it, it will have to take into account the ways in which power relations penetrate the different systems of representation. In other words, “strategic location”—“the author’s position in a text with regard to the Oriental material he writes about”—and “strategic formation”—“a way of analyzing the relationship between texts and the way in which groups of texts, types of texts, even textual genres, acquire mass, density, and referential power among themselves and thereafter in the culture at large”—will be employed as additional methodological devices. This heightened attention to intertextuality may seem to increase the risk of falling into a “segregationist,” textualist theoretical model—a danger that is intrinsic to geocriticism, according to Eric Prieto. In fact, by underlining the “affiliation” of texts to other homogeneously geocentered works, and then to the cultural and ideological systems of their times, not only is the referential relationship between the texts and the real world put under scrutiny, but the location of the texts with regard to the social and political dimension in which they are produced and consumed is also questioned. “To recreate the affiliative network is therefore to make visible, to give materiality back to, the strands holding the text to society, author and culture.” In addition, the material grounding of the research will be ensured by the inclusion of an ecocritical perspective, as the literary production of place and its discursive constitution—that is, the
cultural activities that transform the natural landscape—depend on the enabling conditions of the physical environment.

The stratigraphic logic of geocriticism is particularly useful for an examination of postcolonial environments. The spatiotemporal complexity of a given place will be apprehended both diachronically, tracing the history of the gaze it has been subjected to, and synchronically, looking at how history condenses in coeval but unsynchronized pockets in time. Indeed, the nonsimultaneity of the present world is apparent in the multiple temporalities of today’s postcolonial nations, whose spatial practice and ecoenvironmental discourse frequently repeat colonial frames of reference, often to contradictory effects. Take, for example, the case of forest policy in independent India, which has largely kept up the provisions issued by the former colonial Forest Department, updating and renaming imperial objectives as national interest and replacing “reserved” and “protected” forests with national parks and wildlife sanctuaries. This has translated materially onto the natural landscape: forests have been reengineered, wild animal and plant species have been reintroduced, and the tribal population has been forcibly removed for the purpose of restoring—in fact, reinventing and creating—a primeval, pre-colonial wilderness. Hence, present-day Indian forest landscape (where archaic topographical configurations are attained through adoption of colonial patterns of land exploitation and are invested with contemporary national and international interests) acquires a polychronic quality, depending as well on the body of representations that relates to it. This, in turn, generates different local forms of environmental activism, which a “postcolonial green geocriticism” will incorporate within its object of study.

As a final point, the question of the textual corpus must be briefly addressed. Before undertaking any geocritical analysis, it is necessary to single out a sufficient number of diverse points of view from the existing body of works that focus on a given place. The numerical “threshold of representativeness” will be determined and justified “on a case-by-case basis,” according—among other things—to the extension of the intertextual chain that the real-world referent has brought into being. The types and genres of the chosen texts will be as varied as the “network of politics, culture, ecology, physical space and non-human matter that we should understand as ‘environment.’”

In what follows, I will continue my tentative suggestion for a “postcolonial green geocriticism” by offering a reading of the Sundarbans, the mangrove forest that lies at the Mouths of the Ganges, in the Indian state of West Bengal. I will investigate its
geocentered intertextual chain (inevitably, only a part of it) and try to assess the material consequences held—and often concealed—by its different representational practices. Further, I will employ Amitav Ghosh’s 2004 novel *The Hungry Tide* as the “inner” structure of my analysis, a guideline of sorts that, because of its complex dialogic configuration, will incite, more than constrain, the exploration of other accounts of the place. Hence, I will not steer away from the principle of geocentricity toward an ego-centered approach where the discourse on space is subsumed under a larger study on the writer. In fact, the characters’ diverse modes of perception of the Sundarbans forest will be useful to elicit and organize several other points of view coming from a heterogeneous body of sources: literary (novels) and non-literary works (travel narratives, regional gazetteers, colonial revenue reports, and sociohistorical and environmental surveys) that attest to the relationship between the systems of representation off which they feed and the environmental politics and forms of activism that they—more or less deliberately—maintain.

**Black Jungle, Beautiful Forest: Representations of the Indian Sundarbans**

Since the beginning of the European colonial enterprise, India has been predominantly conceptualized as the degenerated offspring of glorious ancientness, or as a never-changing, exotic essence. These two general trends of representation informed the British colonial understanding of the landscape, pivoted around the mostly stable images of the self-sufficient, harmonious village and the poisoned city (images that would outlast colonialism and enter, to different extents, the rhetoric of the anticolonial movement and of the independent nation). Contrary to such durable body of representations, which extends widely and multifariously to the realm of literature, the Sundarbans forest enjoys a rather small genealogy, hardly to be encountered in the world of fiction. In any case, its network of representations is remarkably varied, stratified with several narratives that do not obliterate one another, but are closely intertwined and operate along a chain of continuous reshapings. That “transformation”—the title of one of the chapters in Amitav Ghosh’s work—is “the rule of life” in the Sundarbans, whose “landscape is not unlike a book—a compilation of pages that overlap without any two ever being the same,” is also made clear by the map prefixed to the novel. It is worth noting that *The Hungry Tide* presents us with a fictional world that is not homogeneous in terms of referentiality: in fact, Lusibari and
Garjontola, the main settings of the novel, are nonreferential places interpolated in a referential space—precisely, the Sundarbans forest. Interestingly, the paratextual map that sets off the story does not show the fictional world in its entirety, but only its real-world, recognizable locations (such as Kolkata, Canning, and Gosaba). If it is true that maps are the organizing principle of narrative, then Ghosh’s novel is deliberately organized around a partial cartography that does not exhaust all possible mappings of the place—or, else, it is the place itself that dodges any attempt to a comprehensive, definitive representation, allowing a margin of inventiveness for other images and imaginings to exist. In any case, this is a sign that the novel and its author neither intend to epitomize the whole of the representational practices that converge on the Sundarbans, nor to provide an authoritative, final understanding of the place and of its socio-environmental questions.

The complexity of the network of viewpoints at the heart of Ghosh’s novel is mirrored by the wide ensemble of characters and is inscribed in their conflicting epistemologies. Even though I will mainly refer to Piya’s and Kanai’s awareness of the place, a set of contrasting representations belongs to other figures in the novel: the more “local”—in fact, differently displaced—knowledge of Fokir (the illiterate fisherman who saves Piya’s life), his mother Kusum (a refugee from Bangladesh) and his “adoptive” father Horen, and the shifting and problematic involvement with minority and local needs, national and nationalistic discourse, of Nilima and Nirmal (Kanai’s aunt and deceased uncle). On the contrary, Piya (the Indo-American cetologist on a research trip in the tide country) and Kanai (the Bengali, Delhi-based interpreter and translator on a family visit) embody the discursive constructs that have been more commonly employed in colonial and postcolonial times—that is, the Sundarbans as a “land of wonders,” as a “no man’s land,” and as a “research field.” These concepts, as we will see, sustain to different extents a logic of appropriation, exploitation, and “moral” authority over the land by outside forces at the expense of the local people.

Piya enters the novel in the role of a “foreigner” (notwithstanding her Bengali origins), and from the outset, she perceives and experiences the Sundarbans landscape in a manner that is not different than that of a colonial nineteenth-century traveler—that is, according to her scientific motifs and outlook and, especially, through a filter of enchantment. Unsurprisingly, her trips across the mangrove forest are punctuated by the same “extraordinary accidents or adventures” that marked the 1665 journey through the Sundarbans accomplished by François Bernier, whose narrative (mentioned and even quoted in
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Ghosh’s novel) is the first circumstanciated account of the place written by a European. Chronicling his nine days’ voyage, the French Jesuit uses a language full of tropes and hyperboles to describe a series of unfamiliar natural phenomena: the Gangetic dolphins’ preying habits, which leave “incredulous” a hundred sailors, the “strange” and “beautiful” appearance of lunar rainbows, the “devilish flames” and “great globes of fire” created by glow-worms, and a storm “so violent” that made “the night of the fifth day [. . .] altogether dreadful and perilous.”

In other words, Bernier is taking its readers to the realm of the Oriental uncanny. Piya’s experience of the same events, while largely apprehended within a rational framework, is also informed by a thin but resilient “element of enchantment” that “her own eyes [have] infused” into the landscape—a mode of perception that grows out of the history of the representational practice initiated by Bernier.

This trend of representation has influenced both literary and non-literary writings—often resorting to the universe of the romance. Let us briefly recall, for example, Salman Rushdie’s well-known “midnight’s child,” Saleem Sinai, fighting—or rather deserting—the 1971 Bangladesh’s war of independence in the Sundarbans, previously described in the novel as “the rightful home of monsters and phantasms.” As he penetrates the “sepulchral greenness of the forest,” a “livid green world where the birds [have] voices like creaking woods and all the snakes [are] blind,” this “magical,” other-worldly “jungle of dreams” becomes a symbolic space for his own metamorphosis and redemption. The tendency to emphasize the obscure qualities of the place is so pervasive that it has even affected a recently-published, long and detailed work on the history, society and environmental policies of the place, accordingly titled The Mysteries of the Sundarbans (by Haraprasad Chattopadhyaya; Calcutta: A. Mukherjee, 1999). Other examples of the scale and persistence of this mode of representation can be found in the novels of Italian adventure writer Emilio Salgari—particularly, I misteri della giungla nera (The Mysteries of the Black Jungle, 1895) and Le due tigri (The Two Tigers, 1904), from the so-called Indo-Malayan Cycle. Salgari wrote very popular feuilletons at the end of the nineteenth century, stories—romances, in fact—set in faraway lands and told by a narrative voice that often stops the flow of the events to supply carefully detailed information on the history, culture, and natural environment of the country. Being no more than an armchair traveler, he found the sources of his lengthy descriptions in the most widely-read travel magazines and nonfictional works of the time, predictably tinged with Orientalist knowledge. Consequently,
the Indian landscape in these and other novels becomes the epitome of all that is fascinating and incomprehensible, and the Sundarbans forest is portrayed as an utterly exotic setting: a lush jungle, tangled with striking tropical vegetation, populated by strange animals and wild beasts, infested by thugs, and hiding all sorts of perils. As for *The Mysteries of the Black Jungle*, in addition to the revealing title, the opening lines suffice to confirm the representational practice employed:

> There is nothing more distressing, odd and terrifying than the spectacle of these Sunderbunds. [...] By day, an enormous, funereal silence reigns, such as to strike terror in the bravest of hearts; by night, a turmoil of shouts, roars, hisses and whistles befalls, such as to freeze the warmest of bloods.31

In *The Two Tigers*, an element of disease, corruption, and misery adds to the fearsome image of the earlier novel: “The trees are extremely tall and grow at an incredible speed, as the soil is very rich. But they are all sick, and have a note of immeasurable desolation that deeply affects whoever has the nerve to penetrate this jumble of plants.”32

Fictional characterizations of the Sundarbans as a “land of wonders” have had important nonfictional consequences, especially as it concerns the question of the indigenous presence and ownership of the territory. Sailing with Fokir across the creeks and rivers of the tide country, Piya recognizes she has “never known the human trace to be so faint, so close to undetectable.”33 Bernier’s islands and channels are a home for animals and vegetation only (but also a hide-out for Dutch and Portuguese sailors), and the jungle is, in the words of Salman Rushdie’s narrator, “so thick that history has hardly ever found the way in.”34 “No cities, no villages, no bungalows, not a single shelter”35 can be found in Salgari’s *Black Jungle*, and when a few hamlets are spotted by the two protagonists of the latter novel (Sandokan, a Malay anti-imperialist pirate, and Tremal Naik, an Indian snake hunter), they amount to “a scattering of miserable mud huts, canopied with leaves and shaded by a handful of withered coconut palms and colossal neem trees, with huge trunks and thick and dark foliage.”36 The Sundarbans, in sum, seems to be overgrown with wilderness, its only legitimate human dwellers being thugs, shipwrecked sailors, or dead bodies:

> Every marabou is standing on the corpse of an Indian, more or less intact but soon to be swallowed up completely. The destitute Bengalis who cannot afford cremation are taken to the Ganges once dead [...] and in time, if they are not devoured by the gharials, creek by creek, they end up here. On these waters you can see real floating graveyards.37
The corollary of these and other accounts of the forest as a land of mystery and magic is, therefore, the emergence of a distinctive perceptive modality and a discursive practice that posit the Sundarbans as a “no man’s land.”

The notion of the tide country as a terra nullius belongs, in Ghosh’s novel, not only to Piya, but also to those characters that, despite having lived in Kolkata, less than a hundred miles away, are perceived as outsiders. When he first sets foot in the Sundarbans, Kanai is astonished at the crowd that materializes in front of his eyes; however, as his uncle Nirmal points out, “[i]t’s only in films […] that jungles are empty of people. Here there are places that are as crowded as any Kolkata bazaar. And on some of the rivers you’ll find more boats than there are trucks on the Grand Trunk Road.”38 Nirmal himself admits having initially regarded the jungle as “an emptiness, a place where time stood still.”39 In the novel, Kanai’s and Nirmal’s standpoints eventually change, as they reject their stereotypical encyclopedia—handed down from the colonial body of representations on the Sundarbans—and begin to acknowledge the social and cultural specificities of the place. In the real world, on the contrary, the image of the Sundarbans as an unowned deserted area has endured ever since it was fashioned and put to profitable use at the beginning of the British expansion in Bengal. Habitation and cultivation—or, at the very least, sporadic occupancy and use of land—had already been known in precolonial times: tradition ascribes the first (and short-lived) attempt at settlement to a Muslim adventurer under the reign of Nazir Shah in the fifteenth century, and from the sixteenth century, the area was notorious for being infested with Portuguese and Magh pirates.40 When the British set eyes on the region in the eighteenth century, it is unlikely that a stable resident population lived there. Nevertheless, Indian Civil Servant William Wilson Hunter’s 1875 description of “[t]he southern portion of the Sundarbans, which comprises the jungle tract along the seashore,” as being “entirely uninhabited, with the exception of a few wandering gangs of woodcutters and fisherman,”41 seems more consistent with colonial policies and representational trends than with the actual state of affairs. In fact, at the time of Hunter’s Statistical Account of Bengal, the official process of reclamation had been going on for over a hundred years.

The history of the colonial reclamation can be examined not only as a succession of surveys, mappings, schemes, policies, and regulations, but also in terms of the representational practices that were employed. Declared a wild and malign environment devoid of human life, the Sundarbans was transformed into a stage where the colonial
government could prove its superiority over nature and assert its economic interests. The anecdote told by Hunter about a “single fierce tiger” having “frequently forced an advanced colony of clearers to abandon their land, and allow it to relapse to jungle,” until the arrival of a gunned English gentleman that eventually killed “the pest.”42 emphasizes—in a rather classic Orientalist manner43—the superiority of the European in controlling the territory against—but supposedly in favor of—the fearful native. As Frederick Trafford of the Bengal Forest Department wrote in 1911, it is indeed “the confidence created by the advent of British rule” that “has enabled large tracts to be repopulated in recent years.”44 These passages testify to an interesting case of rhetorical sanitization: the land—often described as “wasteland”—is to be reclaimed, cleared, and repopulated (rather than seized, transformed, and colonized), as if some original “white” rights on the forest had to be regained. As a matter of fact, as early as 1828 “[t]he inhabited tract known by the name of the Sundarbans” was declared as “ever [having] been, and hereby declared still to be, the property of the State.”45 Customary rights of those who had long been using the land for grazing, product collection, and swidden farming were rejected as a basis of ownership, and were reconceptualized as privileges under the mercy of the colonial government in the legislation drafted in 1869 by the newly-established Indian Forest Department. The principle of state monopoly over Indian woodland was finally sanctioned by the Indian Forest Act of 1878, which distinguished between “reserved forests” (exclusively managed by the state for commercial exploitation), “protected forests” (where a limited number of extra-commercial privileges were recorded), and “leased land.”46

Colonial exploitation of woodland increased after World War I: large areas of natural forests were replaced with plantations of marketable species, at the exclusion of the humans. In 1921, for instance, the size of “reserved forests” in the Sundarbans reached 1,703 square miles,47 twice as much as it was in 1875. While this facilitated capitalist accumulation through timber production, it also expedited disempowerment of local communities and heightened social conflict. India’s independence did not put a stop to this trend. On the contrary, after 1947, the area under control of the Forest Department increased, and in 1952, national interests were asserted over local concerns: as the Forest Policy of the same year declares, “[t]he accident of a village being situated close to a forest does not prejudice the right of the country as a whole to receive benefits of a national asset. […] While, therefore, the needs of the local population must be met to a
reasonable extent, national interests should not be sacrificed.” The nearly imperial authority exercised by the Forest Department over its vast dominions—its “inland empire,” as Amitav Ghosh calls it—has not abated even after the 1988 National Forest Policy, which signaled a turning point in governmental forest management: for the first time, the imperatives of ecological stability and local people’s subsistence requirements were recorded, and the way for future implementation of Joint Forest Management programs was paved. In addition, this document marked a significant shift in the language of forestry, standing for a case of what may be called environmental dressing—a way of covertly reaffirming exclusivist state control over forest land by publicly presenting and endorsing a “domesticated” but pleasing version of environmental discourse. As far as the representation of the Sundarbans is concerned, the foremost effect of this environmental dressing has been the recovery of the “land of wonders” paradigm.

The idea of a marvelous and mysterious jungle had already provided the imaginative framework by which the newly-born colonial government accounted for its sustained interest in the region. In the days of world conflicts and economic crises, the image of an unpopulated wasteland to be fully exploited for the sake of the cranky imperial machine had been created. Now, when environmental global campaigns were all the rage, the emergent independent Indian state reconceptualized the once-productive representational models in a quasi-“deep ecological” idiom. The Sundarbans was to become a haven for wild animals and a treasury of unspoilt nature: an environmental “research field” to be scientifically investigated and efficiently preserved, but where humans do not belong.

WORDS ON LAND: FROM FICTIONAL IMAGININGS TO ENVIRONMENTAL PRAXIS

The association between (neo)colonialist attitudes and environmental concerns is mediated, in The Hungry Tide, by Piya. Indeed, her academic training and fieldwork procedures rely to a great extent on colonial scientific organization and practice. Her professional pantheon, for instance, includes only nineteenth-century British zoologists and naturalists—in the likes of William Roxburgh, John Anderson, and Edward Blyth—and her most precious knowledge-gathering tool when interviewing local people consists of a group of flashcards bearing pictures of the Gangetic and the Irrawaddy dolphins, originally drawn in 1878. As for her state-of-the-art equipment (a GPS monitor, a rangefinder, a depth sounder, and expensive, heavy binoculars),
Mukherjee sees it as the “embodiment of the panoptic knowledge that was generated by, and in turn sustained, capitalist colonialism. As a result, [Piya] is unable to see ‘nature’ as being continuous with specific historical, political and cultural dimensions.”51 In other words, Piya takes possession of the territory by searching the landscape with the masterful gaze of a scientist. This perceptive modality implies an “urban” idea of nature, premised on a (neo)colonial “politics of invisibility”52 by which a land is first emptied of its local people, then readapted as terra nullius, and finally seen as a “sacred” wilderness, possessed by no one but virtually belonging to everyone by birthright.53

The episode of the trapping and killing of a stray tiger by an entire village community (an incident that relates to a long-lasting history of human-wildlife conflict in the Sundarbans and to a more recent dichotomy of “old” and “new,” “local” and “cosmopolitan” tigers)54 bears witness not only to Piya’s inability to grasp the texture of the relationships that exist among the various human and animal inhabitants of the forest, but also to her failure to accept a different, indigenous perspective on the local environment. As a matter of fact, her initial viewpoint on the Sundarbans is similar to the one sponsored by the champions of Project Tiger, a nationwide scheme launched by the Indian government in 1972 after a large global campaign for the conservation of the South Asian tiger. As early as 1973, 513 square miles of the forest was selected as the “core zone” of the Sundarbans Tiger Reserve, one of the first eight (now 53) to be created in the country. This area was carefully bounded and reengineered for the benefit of tigers, and all human activity was suspended: limited access for cultivation and collection of minor forest products was allowed only in so-called buffer zones. The Sundarbans Tiger Reserve—which lies inside the Sundarbans National Park, designated a World Heritage Site—is now also a Biosphere Reserve, included in UNESCO’s Man and Biosphere Program. With all these top-notch international labels, the question raised by Indian anthropologist Annu Jalais appears to be crucial: ultimately, “Whose World Heritage Site”55 is the Sundarbans forest today? Clearly, it does not belong to the local community of peasants, displaced from the land and deprived of its already meager resources. Other social groups have surely gained more: “first, a class of ex-hunters turned conservationists belonging mostly to the declining Indian feudal elite and second, representatives of international agencies”,56 and, finally, rich international eco-tourists.

Often blind—or short-sighted—in respect to the fragile interconnection between ecosystems, cultural traditions, and social justice,
relevant global organizations such as the World Wild Fund for Nature (WWF) and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) have promoted a transcendental image of static purity that can hardly be sustained on a local level. Unsurprisingly, the preservationist discourse that they employ operates inside the colonial representational framework of the Sundarbans as a deserted “land of wonders.” Let us take, for example, a recent book written by Italian WWF honorary president Fulco Pratesi. Part travel memoir, part environmental awareness book for children, Pratesi’s work on the Indian Sundarbans is organized around the image of Sandokan, the main hero in Emilio Salgari’s novels of the Indo-Malayan Cycle. As we have seen, Sandokan’s adventures are set in a fictional land that revives the vision of an exoticized jungle, as mysteriously beautiful and perilous as pristinely uninhabited (except for the den of the thug sect). In other words, the long and detailed descriptions of the landscape that punctuate the novels develop from, and in turn maintain, the predominant colonial mode of representation. In the afterword to The Mysteries of the Black Jungle, Italian children’s literature scholar Antonio Faeti acknowledges the dreamlike qualities of Salgari’s forest, as well as its “intensely ecological” connotations—but, he adds, “ecological in our very own, contemporary way.” The revealing, most likely involuntary connection between nineteenth-century colonial conceptions of nature (transpiring from Salgari’s fictional world) and contemporary ecological thought is sanctioned—yet again, only half deliberately—by Pratesi, who explicitly promotes wilderness preservation at the expense of lived environments (along with WWF Italy, with its black-and-white panda logo depicted on the book’s front cover). The “huge population increase” and the likely expansion of crop fields in the deltaic region are seen by Pratesi as the major dangers for the survival of wildlife; on the contrary, the “volleys” of flashlights from rich tourists and naturalists that, “armed with cameras,” scurry about these “wild cathedrals” are a “rather cheap price to pay for the safety regained,” as far as animals are concerned. Besides, “were it not for the wealth brought by tourists, charmed by the wonders of these jungles and by their four-legged residents, this still-unspoiled region would have already been turned into tilled lands, paddy fields and pastures for zebus. [ . . . ] Were it not for tourism, agriculture and forest exploitation would be widespread, and goodbye tigers and rhinos, elephants and panthers, buffaloes and peacocks.” In short, inside Sandokan’s—and Pratesi’s and WWF Italy’s—jungle, no space is allotted to permanent human environments, and the native flora and fauna
dispossess the—“less native,” should we provocatively say?—village communities. Inscribed in the representational concept of *terra nullius* and enforced in the material process of reclamation, the postulate of the “innate alienness” of the Sundarbans inhabitants has ended up depriving them of their rights over the land and questioning the value of their existence and aspirations. The forced eviction (and the killings that went with it) of Bengali refugees settled in the Sundarbans island of Morichjhapi at the end of the 1970s provides a brutal example of the pre-eminence achieved by national and international wildlife conservation interests over the needs of marginalized minorities—small peasants, destitute migrants, outcast, or backward caste members whose lives are worth “less than dirt or dust.” In 2002, another eviction was ordered by the West Bengal government, affecting now the transient community of fishermen that customarily used the island of Jambudwip for fish-drying, a traditional source of income. As in the case of Pratesi’s book, this episode brings out the link between colonial imagery, environmental concerns, and ecotourism projects: once cleared of all signs of human activity on grounds of environmental security, the island was ready to be refashioned as an immaculate place—a “wild fiction,” in fact—inside the multibillion-rupee tourism complex proposed by the business group Sahara India Parivar, dotted by “virgin islands” and beaches of “pristine glory.” A successful nationwide mobilization—involving a consistent number of independent observers, among them Amitav Gosh himself—raised the alert against the project, which was stalled and eventually cancelled.

**Conclusion**

The large network of representations of the Sundarbans that I have tried to condense in these pages is organized in distinct but interlocking symbolic systems, internally consistent and individually responsible for specific material effects, but all at once implicated in the mainstream environmental discourse on the region. This geocentered web of spatial imaginings, types of land exploitation, and forms of biopolitical control could be further extended by weaving in other points of view on the place and on the relationships between humans and the natural environment. In *The Hungry Tide*, for example, Amitav Ghosh gives voice to a more local perspective, historically disregarded and silenced by those in power—not least on account of the nonstandard
expressive forms it employs (such as folk theatre, songs, and oral storytelling). Without commenting further on this, it is worthwhile to note that this native understanding of the place (which, incidentally, is neither monolithic nor purely “indigenous”) is not deemed infallible or superior to other forms of knowledge: in fact, “it has very serious limitations and failings of its own,” as it involves “a contract drawn up and signed by a single party, and it provides for no mechanism through which to interpret the needs of the other protagonists.” A rethinking of current spatial and environmental policies—in the Sundarbans and elsewhere—must therefore follow a global reimagining of the place, allowing for all the different and divergent representations by which it has been apprehended.

“A place is what you make of it,” says Nirmal in Ghosh’s novel. The task of a geocritical reading of the postcolonial environment (a “postcolonal green geocriticism,” as I have tentatively called it here) would precisely be to examine “what has been made of it”—how it has been construed, how it has been performatively produced—in order to facilitate an understanding of its plural geographies and its interrelated histories of people, nature, and patterns of colonial domination and capitalist control.

Notes
5. Grassin, “Pour une science des espaces littéraires,” i.
7. Peta Mitchell and Jane Stadler, “Redrawing the Map: An Interdisciplinary Geocritical Approach to Australian Cultural Narratives,” in Geocritical Explorations: Space, Place, and Mapping in Literary


13. Ibid., 63.


17. Ibid., 119.

18. “The geocritical approach being geocentered, it is less a study of different types of perception than of the effects, in terms of representation, of the intersecting points of view.” Ibid., 129.


24. The myth of a pre-colonial India as a land of self-sufficient village republics nourished the struggle toward national independence, though it perpetuated at the same time colonial stereotypes. The most prominent champion of the ideal of a village-based society was M.K. Gandhi, who popularized the notion of *village Swaraj* (self-rule); see


26. Ibid., 3.


37. Ibid., 245 (translation mine).


39. Ibid., 186.


42. Ibid., 328.


50. Here I loosely adapt Emma Tarlo’s concept of “village dressing” to the purpose of my analysis. See note 24 above.
51. Mukherjee, *Postcolonial Environments*, 120.
52. See Young, “Postcolonial Remains,” 23–27.
53. The concept of “wilderness” is itself a North American product of urban elite imagination that originates from a “colonially produced genocide” (the eradication of native peoples). See Laura Wright, “Wilderness into Civilized Shapes”: *Reading the Postcolonial Environment* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 11.
59. Ibid., 18 (translation mine).
