



Imag(in)ing Decolonial Ecology: Exploring Tropical Eco-Graphic Narratives


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Abstract

Decoloniality is a critical approach that seeks to dismantle the hegemonic and oppressive structures of Eurocentric epistemologies. It promotes reflection on how texts and knowledge production perpetuate othering and oppression. Imag(in)ing decoloniality along with ecocritical thinking, this paper envisions tropical ecology as transcending the constraints of dominant discourses and explores how graphic narrative aids in reconfiguring the boundaries between human subjectivity and decolonial-ecocritical aesthetics. The article emphasises the potential of multimodality to proffer novel approaches for considering the connections between human/non-human, nature/culture and the tropical/temperate, and advocates a decanonisation of literary genres to decentralise the power of logocentric discourse. More specifically, the paper examines three eco-graphic narratives—*Martina and the Bridge of Time* (2020), *Dengue* (2015), and *Bhimayana* (2011)—to demonstrate their capacity in articulating coloniality in the tropical environment to highlight the importance of addressing historical and cultural wounds. This intersection of decoloniality, ecocriticism, and graphic narrative, along with the notion of tropicality, allows us to witness the evolution of the fields in an exciting and complex way. In sum, we examine how graphic narrative can act as a decolonial option for the tropics.

Keywords: decolonial, eco-graphic narrative, graphic novel, ecocriticism, tropical ecology, tropicality, multimodality

Introduction : Tropical Graphic Resistance

Literature's inception dates to ancient caves where traditional peoples have sought to document their struggles, fears, and beliefs in images. In the Palaeolithic era (from 3.3 billion B.P. to 11,650 B.P.) Homo sapiens and Neanderthals created an array of cave carvings and petroglyphs, each one a testament to the human impulse to communicate and leave an indelible mark upon the world. Stan Tychinski opines:

since the days of prehistoric man [*sic*], people have been telling stories by using pictures instead of prose. From the cave paintings of the Cro-Magnon Men to the hieroglyphics of the Ancient Egyptians, graphic storytelling has been used as a popular means for communicating thoughts and ideas (Tychinski, 2004, p.1).

This visual form of expression, according to Christy Marx (2007), eventually resulted in the unfolding of a new hybridised form of literature: the artistic synthesis of the visual and the verbal mode, which has come to be known as comics or graphic novels. She adds “that the urge to tell a story through images is as old as human consciousness” (p. 79). However, with various shifts in culture, the verbal mode overpowered the visual mode, the Logos became the popular mode of evoking a story, and the imagistic way of expression gradually lost its proficiency.

The Sulawesi Island of Indonesia records the existence of figurative cave art at least 43,900 years ago. The place bears the signs of humans’ “adaptive predisposition for inventing, telling and consuming stories”, providing “the most direct insight that we have into the earliest storytelling” (Aubert et al., 2019, p. 1). This tradition of graphic storytelling has a rich and diverse history in the tropical regions of the world, with artists/writers from Asia, Africa, Australia, and Latin America exploring a myriad range of themes and styles. A theme that is particularly pertinent in our current geological epoch, the Anthropocene, is ecological degradation.

The theme of ecology prominently features in tropical graphic narratives and is often intertwined with that of coloniality. This thematic intersectionality creates a unique opportunity for exploring the disciplinary affinities between decoloniality, ecocriticism, and graphic narrative. Both decoloniality and ecocriticism seek to liberate literature from the grip of anthropocentric discourse, while graphic narrative aims to de-canonize literary genres by assimilating multimodality and incorporating the visual mode alongside the verbal. In this context, our paper aims to document how the multimodal aspect of graphic narratives of the tropics register gestures of resistance against the imperialist web of domination. Incorporating the theory of decoloniality along with ecocritical theories, the paper aims to move beyond the ecological gaze of the west/temperate and explore decolonial options from/for the tropics. Informed and

inspired by the theory of decoloniality formulated by Latin American theorists and activists Walter Mignolo, Anibal Quijano, and Arturo Escobar, who sought to challenge and undo the legacy of colonialism including its cultural, economic and social dimensions through “epistemic reconstruction” (Quijano, 2007, p. 176), “decolonial ecology” aims to deconstruct the “contemporary ecological issues through an emancipation from the colonial fracture” (Ferdinand, 2022, pp. 13-14) by “delinking” and reconstituting ecological thought that moves beyond the “logic of coloniality” (Mignolo, 2017, pp. 44-45). The paper, therefore, studies the advances made by ecocriticism that have transgressed the theoretical boundaries of postcolonial and posthumanist thinking. To illustrate this, we explore three graphic narratives: *Martina and the Bridge of Time* (2020) from Panama, *Dengue* (2015) from Uruguay, and *Bhimayana* (2011) from India. Each offers a unique perspective on the wounds of colonialism and depicts resistance against epistemic violence, historical othering, and oppression.

Ecocriticism, Graphic Narrative, and Post/Decolonialism

“Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty, 1996, p. xix). It seeks to offer new ways to approach literary work through an ecological lens. Taking rhizomatic¹ steps, it converges and concentrates on “increasingly heterogeneous foci” (Buell, 2005, p. viii) ranging from class, gender, and race to the deconstruction of human language. This approach allows us to understand the hybrid interdisciplinary nature of ecocriticism, which takes into account diverse disciplines for contributing to the study of human/nature relationships. Additionally, ecocriticism also acknowledges varying genres and texts that represent these relationships.

Environmental activism has long acknowledged the importance of visuals in raising eco-consciousness. Graphic narratives, being a form that “utilize a combination of depiction and description” (Jones, 2019, p. 4), makes it an apt multimodal form for raising eco-awareness. Actively subverting the monochromatic nature of the literary text, graphic narratives attract readers’/audiences’ attention and participation. Moreover, both ecocriticism and graphic narratives share some commonalities. While ecocriticism establishes a relationship between nature and literature by visualising nature as an external force and literature as a verbal representation, a similar hybrid notion can also be seen reiterated in graphic narratives. The graphic narrative is “a hybrid word-and-image form in which two narrative tracks, one verbal and one visual, register temporality spatially” (Chute, 2008, p. 452). In this sense, both are assemblages “that commingle seemingly incommensurable components (literature and the land, text and image)” (Bealer, 2014, p. iii). In Graphic narratives, the

¹ The Rhizomatic theory proposed by Deleuze and Guattari, challenges traditional hierarchical structures and emphasises decentralised and interconnected systems.

environment can be utilised in multiple ways, not only to provide us with the scope to analyse the environmental trope, but also to see the interplay between various images, spaces, and texts, making it an act of environmental performance. Furthermore, in graphic narratives, the environment is omnipresent in the background; thus, even if the story shifts, the presence of the environment can be witnessed throughout all the panels, making the multimodal aspect of graphic narratives an apt mode for environmental representation. Advocating for a mode that evokes ecological thought through visuals rather than focusing only on words, in his seminal non-fiction work, *The Great Derangement* (2016), Amitav Ghosh sought a departure from the logocentric form of writing and suggested that thinking about climate change will require a shift towards thinking in images (p. 112).

Colonialism and environmental ransack have gone hand in hand. Jonathan Bate, in *The Song of Earth* (2000), argued for a relationality between deforestation and imperialism, pointing at its historical footing. While referring to Robert Pogue Flarrison's *Forests: The Shadow of Civilisation*, Bate (2000) states that "imperialism has always brought with it deforestation and the consuming of natural resources" (p. 87). Alfred Crosby (1986) has termed this phenomenon "ecological imperialism" (p. 105). Ecocriticism has long taken a postcolonial stance in order to expose the links between human and non-human oppression attempted by colonisers. However, as Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (2009) suggest, "the postcolonial dimensions of ecocriticism" also aim to see how environment related literature might aid in "the undoing of the epistemological hierarchies and boundaries," particularly "under historical and/or contemporary conditions of colonialism" (p. 23).

Building on the idea of postcolonial ecocriticism, graphic narrative offers a compelling means to challenge dominant epistemologies and promote decolonisation. Incorporating artistic conventions, it upholds traditional forms of storytelling and can act as a decolonial option by means of its three-fold usability. Firstly, by means of its rhetoric and subject matter. In any text, the narrative is carried forward using some tropes, and when a text uses a decolonial trope, the narrative itself can be unfolded to be read through the prism of decoloniality. Secondly, the structure of a graphic narrative also acts as word/image activism. Hilary Chute (2008) observes how "comics move forward in time through the space of the page, through its progressive counterpoint of presence and absence: packed panels (or frames) alternating with gutters (empty space)" (p. 452). Therefore, these elements – panels, gutter, and sequentiality – contrive to form a space-time continuum where the readers' mind breaks forth, building a narrative on their own accord. Writers for centuries have struggled to liberate themselves from the chains of 'coloniser language'. However, in the pursuit of reaching a wider audience, their works have often been translated into English (or French or Spanish, for instance), ultimately reinforcing the linguistic hegemony of the coloniser. Thus thirdly, the use of graphic representation can

overcome this obstacle. There are graphic narratives with limited words or no words, and in such cases, authors are liberated as their images speak across the globe. Moreover, the art form of graphic narratives, too, can serve as a decolonial option, empowering authors to reclaim their voices and stories through a visual medium of their own. Just as writing in the Gikuyu language helped Ngugi wa Thiongo (1986) decolonise his mind from the “spiritual subjugation” of language (p. 9), graphic writers/illustrators, too, can liberate themselves from the art of the colonisers by using their own graphic style that resonates with their cultural art forms.

A Selected History of Graphic Narratives of the Tropics

Imag(in)ing a literary canon that encompasses the rich tapestry of cultures, languages, ethnicities, and races to constitute tropical literature is a formidable task. It is a challenge to form an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983, p. 24) of our own, revealing the relationality of our tropical consciousness. A common thread that draws together the literary imaginations of these disparate groups to create ties is tropical geography, which serves as an element, connecting the entire tropical region. The tropical fecundity of this geographical region, in fact, is responsible for the formation of colonies that eventually connected people through their collective experience of trauma, pain and oppression. The memories of the various colonial periods continue to be ingrained in the collective consciousness, forming a powerful thread that ties the people of the tropics together. Another element that contributes to this sense of shared identity is art and imagery. Scrutiny of the literary-scape of the region reveals that throughout the centuries, the predominant mode of expression has been images rather than text. Correspondingly, spiritual practices rooted in animism or nature worship, prevalent in tropical regions, are often imbued with visual elements that evoke powerful sensory experiences. With the rise of graphic narratives, this rich tradition of visual storytelling has been revived, issuing across the region’s cultural landscapes and continuing to unite and inspire successive generations of writers and readers alike. The graphic and comic traditions of the tropics have been woven through a multitude of influences ranging from pre-colonial history, myths, folklores, religion, pangs of colonialism, political turmoil, and neoliberal modes of development.

In the Philippines, “komiks” had an overwhelming appreciation in popular culture. Since its genesis in 1922, comics have always been the cheapest form of entertainment for Filipinos (Lawagan, 2017), fostering a league of legendary illustrators, including Francisco V. Coching, Severino Reyes, Tony Velasquez, Mars Ravelo, Jose Zabala Santos, Nestor Redondo Pablo Gomez Clodualdo del Mundo, Fred Carillo, and the like (Lawagan, 2017). One of the most iconic works in the history of Filipino comics is *Lapu Lapu* by Francisco V. Coching, which was serialised from 1953 to 1954. The narrative introduced one of the legendary characters of the Philippines, Lapu Lapu, and chronicles the fight for his nation in the battle of Mactan,

where he and his team valiantly and decisively defeated the forces of Ferdinand Magellan and his European colonisers, which delayed the Spanish occupation of the Philippines by forty years. This graphic novel was well received by readers/audiences, sparking a new era of graphic narratives in the Philippines.

In Malaysia and Singapore, graphic narratives emerged around the late twentieth century and were influenced by Japanese manga art. The predominant theme comprised sci-fi, horror, and romance. *Lat the Kampung Boy* (1979) is an internationally recognised graphic novel by Malaysian Datuk Mohammad Nor bin Mohammad Khalid, popularly known as Lat. The novel reveals layers of environmental issues. Set in a traditional Malay village, the story revolves around the young boy Lat, who loves his land, and his heritage. He prays and hopes that his village lands won't succumb to the insatiable greed of the tin mining company. In Singapore, the comic artist Sonny Liew has produced some of the best comics in the country, ranging across themes of Environment and Colonialism. One of his most notable works, *Malinky Robot* (2011), blends the theme of sci-fi and dystopia. In *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* (2015), Liew explores the themes of childhood, colonialism, and political turmoil.

Indonesia's rich history of graphic narratives dates back to the 1950s, with artists like R.A. Kosasih publishing long-form comics that drew on traditional Indonesian folklore and legends. Kosasih undertook the massive task of transfusing ancient Hindu epics with topical Indonesian folklore, which made him "the undisputed Godfather of Indonesian graphic storytelling" (Gartenberg, 2012, p. 2). Indonesia's green and vibrant world featured in the works of famous comic author Djair. The Silat serial entitled *Leonard Van Eisen*, composed by Djair, portrays "colonial greed and wickedness" (Gartenberg, 2012, p. 5), bringing to life the world of 19th-century Indonesia, a time when the Dutch colonial powers held sway over the archipelago, exploiting its resources and people. However, by the 1970s, the medium had taken a more political tone, with artists such as Dwi Koendoro using graphic storytelling to critique corruption and oppression. Lately, creators like Eko Nugroho have continued to push the boundaries of graphic narratives in Indonesia, exploring themes of sexuality, race, gender, identity and neo-colonial globalisation.

The history of comic art in Brazil is about 150 years old. Starting with satirical pieces known as cartoons, Brazilian "sequential art" (Eisner, 1985, p. 7) has been heavily influenced by the European and American comic revolution and Japanese manga art. However, it took a significant turn with artists such as Angeli, Laerte, and Glauco. The graphic narrative *Cumbé* (2014) by "Marcelo d'Saete represents one of the first literary and artistic attempts to come to terms with the country's dark past through the eyes of its victims" (Mallonee, 2015, para. 2) depicting the lives of enslaved Africans in colonial Brazil and the ecological devastation caused by sugar plantations. Reversing the colonial point of view through the presentations of Afro-Brazilians makes *Cumbé*

especially strong. *Jaguara* (2005), another acclaimed comic book series by Altemar Domingos, showcases the story of a Brazilian warrior who belongs to the Krenakores tribe of the Amazon. The narratives amalgamate ecology, fantasy, and fiction with Brazilian folklore.

With a rich tradition of graphic storytelling through cave paintings, *pattachitra*, temples, and ancient Hindu scriptures, Indian graphic novels have continued the traditional into the postmodern period with the serialisation of *Amar Chitra Katha* (1967), based on religious scriptures, epics, legends and folktales. *This Side, That Side* (2013), a collection of visual narratives, portrays the trauma of the partition of India. *A Gardener in The Wasteland* (2011) by Aparajita Ninan and S. Natarajan poignantly shows the pangs of caste discrimination. Sarnath Banerjee's *Corridor* (2004) darkly humourizes urban life, and Vishwajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm* (2010) explores the anti-Sikh riots of 1984.

With rising climatic uncertainty, ecological themes started to pervade contemporary graphic narratives from the tropics. Ecology and concerns about ecological degradation are important, not only because the colonisers of the temperate zone severely exploited tropical ecologies, but also because this process continues through “neo-colonialism” (Nkrumah 1965, p. ix). The major themes of environmental graphic narratives include colonisers’ roles in destroying ecological sustainability, ecological dystopias, neoliberalism, bioregionalism, bio-piracy, and the like. In India, Orijit Sen’s *River of Stories* (1994) explores the tension between ecology, local people and neo-colonial power surrounding the construction of the controversial Narmada River dam. In Australia, eco-graphic novels include *Mad Max Fury Road* (2015), a graphic narrative by Australian filmmaker cum graphic novelist George Miller as an example of a sub/tropical landscape turned into an apocalyptic wasteland due to humankind’s quest to harness and overpower nature. A graphic novel that links current apocalypse with colonialism is *Storm Warning* (2021) by Indigenous writer/artist team Lauren Boyle and Alyssa Mason. Chilean graphic novelist Claudia Davila, in *Luz Sees the Light* (2011), illustrates issues regarding fossil fuels and emphasises the importance of sustainable development. Environmental graphic narratives hold immense potential to encourage critical thinking and ecological consciousness. As Julie M. Elman (2017) suggests, “fear becomes tangible” when visualised (p. 1), and environmental graphic narratives aid in this venture by allowing readers to witness the extent of humanity's exploitation of the tropical environment and its peoples. And the need to halt this continuing (neo)colonial exploitation through decolonisation.

Unlearning and (Re)learning in *Martina and the Bridge of Time*

Decolonial options include reclaiming and celebrating Indigenous knowledge and traditions that have been silenced or erased by the colonisers, challenging prolonged

epistemic violence and power structures, and promoting alternative perspectives. Hence, “learning to unlearn” (Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012. p. 1) the dominant narratives that were set and propagated by the colonisers assume a critical role in decolonial philosophy. People living in the tropics for thousands of years prior to the various waves of colonisation were primarily Indigenous with belief systems that emphasised harmonious and reciprocal relations with nature. This scenario was radically altered with the temperate world’s exploration of the tropics for purposes of extraction and exploitation.

Martina and the Bridge of Time (2020) is a Panamanian Sci-Fi young adult graphic novel written and illustrated jointly by Aaron O’Dea and Ian Cooke Tapia. It challenges the traditional textual documentation of Panamanian history that usually begins with the Spanish occupation in 1502. Instead, it tells the story of the land and its people over millions of years. By doing so, *Martina and the Bridge of Time* offers a powerful critique of how the Spanish colonisers moulded, forged, and falsified the history of Panama to serve their interests. It also challenges readers to consider alternative ways of seeing the past. When Martina, the young protagonist, asks her teacher about “the real history of the Isthmus of Panama” (O’Dea & Tapia, 2020, p. 4), she realises no one in Panama asks such questions. In her second attempt to seek the answer, she asks Uncle Osvaldo, but he, too, fails; he “knows everything about coffee farming” (O’Dea & Tapia, 2020, unpaginated), but not the real history of his land. The reference to elderly Panamanian people solely invested in coffee farming also reminds one of the fact that coffee was not an indigenous plant of Panama; rather, it was an alien plant brought by European settler-colonials in the 19th century.

As Walsh argues, “Decoloniality denotes ways of thinking, knowing, being, and doing that began with, but also precede, the colonial enterprise and invasion” (2018, p. 17). In such an attempt to decolonise history from western thought, the protagonist of the graphic novel, Martina, decides to create a time machine of her own. Taking a cue from H.G Well’s *The Time Machine* (1895), gathering the available machinery and applying theories related to quantum tunnelling and wormholes, she finally cracks the code for the time machine. Using the trope of time travel, the author aims ventures beyond the typical (colonialist) Spatio-temporal framework, which will enable a more comprehensive examination of the unique qualities and features of tropical regions “in a position to manage the discourse” (Mignolo, 2011, 275). Travelling back to the precolonial era in search of one’s indigenous roots symbolises the quest of the colonised to (re)turn back to the past. In an impressive exploration of the untold history of the Isthmus of Panama, the graphic novel takes readers on a journey through time: from the Cretaceous period (80 million years B.P.) to the creation of Panama, through volcanic eruptions and plate tectonic shifts, to the arrival of the early humans, to the “Pre-Columbian Epoch” 600 years ago (O’Dea & Tapia, 2020, np). Martina travels back to ancient Panama to think in “the spaces and time that the self-narrative of

modernity invented as its outside to legitimise its own logic of coloniality” (Mignolo, 2011a, p. 282).

One of the key tropes that emerges out of *Martina and the Bridge of Time* is the idea of the tropical environment as a ground of constant struggle. Throughout the narrative, we witness how the environment has moulded the lives of the humans who have continued living in the Isthmus of Panama for millions of years. The environment is pictured as an independent entity, existing millions of years before any sign of human existence and is not a product of our socio-linguistic construction. From the earliest hunter-gatherers of Panama who relied on nature for food, shelter, and instruments, to the modern-day Panamanians who are struggling with the negative consequences of climate crisis, the tropical environment has always been both a source of sustenance and a site of constant struggle. *Martina and the Bridge of Time* emphasises how important a role the environment serves in shaping the country's history, and, thus, becomes a powerful reminder of the need to prioritise environmental justice in our understanding of both history and the present. The novel beautifully visualises and imagines the Great American Biotic Interchange event that occurred approximately three million years ago. Martina envisions large prehistoric creatures: camels, peccaries, elephants, and even a giant ground sloth with whom she forms a bond. This relationship between humans and non-human species evokes ecological thoughts of cohabitation and inclusivity promoting environmental justice in our understanding of past and present.

The imaginative world of *Martina and the Bridge of Time* not only advances the importance of the environment in shaping history but also serves as a powerful tool for decolonisation. Decolonisation compels a “delink[ing] from territorial and imperial epistemology grounded on theological (Renaissance) and egological (Enlightenment) politics of knowledge” (Mignolo, 2011, 274). Martina's historical narrative challenges the Eurocentric norms of historical narration, which typically begin with the arrival of the Spanish colonisers, a history from which the prints of the indigenous can't be effaced. Rather than focus on the Spanish conquest, Martina's narrative ends before their arrival, allowing her to hover over the fabric of time and space, tracing her lineage back to her real ancestors from almost 600 years ago. She realises that the stories her grandmother tells her are the same as the stories that these people are telling, highlighting the role of stories as a medium for reconnection and interconnection between Indigenous people across centuries. Martina's narrative emphasises the importance of stories in carrying ancestry, legacy, and lineage across time. The projection of the lizard artefact not only serves the purpose of a decolonial mechanism to reverberate indigenous culture, identity, and historical glory, but also projects how the artform resonates with ecological instances, as we see them accept Nature as the source of all knowledge and the base of their existence. It highlights the

interdependence and entanglement indigenous people have with other non-human “actants” (Latour, 1987, p. 84).

Figure 1. *Martina and the Bridge of Time*



In this panel, Martina tries to imagine Panama's history before the Spanish's arrival. (O'Dea & Tapia, 2021, p. 3). Reproduced with authors' kind permission.

Martina and the Bridge of Time reminds a curious reader of how the history of Panama is one of bloodsheds, massacres and ethnic cleansings, pointing out the broader and similar matrix of colonisation in Central and Latin American countries. The very beginning of the graphic novel (see Figure 1) bears a reminder of the Spanish brutality against the aboriginal Panamanian Indians. The hybrid visual-verbal medium of the graphic narrative offers a unique opportunity for the narrators to represent the tropical environment of Panama with the vitality of all its diverse flora and fauna in a way that traditional textual formats may not be able to achieve. The use of visual imagery allows “the power of cartoons to command viewer’s involvement and identification and realism to capture the beauty and complexity of the visual world” (McCloud, 1994, p. 204), paving the way for an immersive and engaging experience for readers, particularly younger audiences who may be more drawn to graphic novels than traditional history books burdened with tedious information.

The unique history of Panama, as presented in the narrative, creates a critical consciousness that helps young adult readers be aware of their own identity, ethnicity, and culture. *Martina and the Bridge of Time*, with all its graphic elements and

enveloping visual imageries of a decolonised history, turns itself into a critical pedagogical tool, and, as Freire has noted, helps one look at the past as “a means of understanding more clearly what and who they [readers] are so that they can more wisely build the future” (2005, 84). Unlearning the falsified narratives set by the colonial masters of the temperate Global North and (re)learning the untold stories of rootlessness, massacre, and plundering of the tropics, Martina becomes a metaphor for a larger struggle for decolonisation and the reclamation of Indigenous knowledge systems and culture of the Global South, which was once historically silenced. As Tlostanova and Mignolo observe (2012): “And what we say is that it is time to start learning to unlearn this assumption among others in order to relearn.” (p.3)

Coloniality and the (Post)human Condition in *Dengue*

Uruguay, like other Latin American countries, has a significant colonial legacy. The subtropical region is now experiencing alarming ecological degradation, resulting in even warmer conditions than the tropics. The hot and humid climate in these regions has historically been a breeding ground for numerous diseases. The Uruguayan graphic narrative *Dengue*, by Rodolfo Santullo and Matias Bergara, projects a future reflecting how the worsening climatic condition of this region triggers a dengue outbreak that gradually leads to an apocalyptic event. Climate change has become a global phenomenon, and it is “increasingly threatening the viability of Uruguay’s coastal communities—where 70 per cent of the country’s population live” and “in the past three years, almost half of Uruguay’s territory was under agricultural emergency due to severe droughts” (Mihm & Trenchi, 2022, “Part II”). The Intergovernmental Panel of OECD’s report (2004), namely *Development and Climate Change in Uruguay: Focus on Coastal Zones, Agriculture and Forestry*, projects an average temperature increase in Uruguay “of 1.1°C by 2050 and 1.9°C by 2100” (p. 6).

The graphic novel *Dengue* captures the impact of dengue fever on the people of Uruguay and the challenges of addressing this tropical disease. In the story, we witness how global warming has caused an explosion in the mosquito populations in the capital Montevideo, leading to a deadly dengue outbreak causing genetic mutation and creating a new post-human hybrid species that is part-human, part-mosquito. These human-mosquito hybrids face hostility and persecution from human society due to their grotesque appearance and unfamiliar existence. The novel points out humans’ intolerance towards the Other—the human-mosquito breed—as they threaten their very subjectivity, and shows how the binaries between I and Thou/Self and Other posit grave ecological risks. Rosie Braidotti believes that otherness is often associated with negative traits as opposed to what is rational, moral, masculine and western. She states:

In so far as difference spells inferiority, it acquires both essentialist and lethal connotations for people who get branded as the ‘others.’

These are the sexualised, racialised, and naturalised others, who are reduced to the less-than-human status of disposable bodies. (Braidotti, 2013, p. 2)

This othering of posthuman bodies directly hints towards the historical othering of the indigenous Latin American population by the Spanish and Portuguese colonisers. The presence of the Charrúa people in Latin America can be traced back 4000 years ago through their rock art. The community was gazed upon by the colonisers as parasites and disease spreaders who needed to be exterminated for the safer habitation by European settlers. Through colonial genocide, attempts were made to eradicate them. The Massacre of Salsipuedes in 1831 decimated most of the Charrúa population. The graphic mosquito-human hybrid is a metaphorical representation of these indigenous populations. In the graphic narrative all the other ask “is for space to live peacefully alongside one another” (Santullo & Bergara, 2015, Book I, p. 24), as they have no ground to clash since they are also humans (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. *Dengue*



In this panel, the post-human hybrids advocate for cooperation and peaceful survival. (Santullo & Bergara, 2015, Book I, p. 23). Reproduced with authors' kind permission.

Through the projection of these posthuman hybrid forms, Santullo and Bergara engage the concept of multispecies entanglement. *Dengue* addresses concepts of entanglement, interconnectedness, and embeddedness; as opposed to the colonialist ideas of racism, elimination and extinction. By the end of the narrative, we see how the humans decide to commingle with the hybrid species, delivering the message: “adaptation is the one trait we all share” (Santullo & Bergara, 2015, Book II, p. 43).

The inter-relationship projected between the heterogeneous theoretical ideas of post-humanity and postcoloniality not only critiques the ingrained power struggle within the binary oppositions—human/non-human, self/other and the coloniser/colonised—but also emphasises the agency and resistance of marginalised individuals and groups. The notion of in-betweenness prevalent in both theories expands the purview of the storyline in *Dengue*. The in-betweenness formed by the hybrid human-mosquito extrapolates the in-between spaces of the graphic novel—of frames and gutters—creating a “space for the reader to produce their own narrative” (Dittmer 2010 p.232-233). It also encompasses the in-between identities of indigenous peoples, whose lives are always on the edge or periphery, and the in-betweenness of the geographical space of the tropics, which is situated between the two temperate zones and shares roots of oppression and suppression. Therefore, through its verbal/visual vocabulary, the novel projects its decolonial agenda by espousing the values of entanglement of humans’ interconnectedness in the web of life, inspiring the reader/audience “to embrace liminality” (Mignolo, 1994, p. 519).

(Re)storying the Tropics through the Art of Their Own in *Bhimayana*

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o in *Decolonizing the Mind* poses significant and substantive queries:

Why not create literary monuments in our own languages? Why - in other words should Okara not sweat it out to create in Ijaw, which he acknowledges to have depths of philosophy and a wide range of ideas and experiences? (Thiong'o, 1986, p. 8)

Thiongo argues that the notion of language transcends mere communication and is an inseparable part of our human experience. Therefore, by rejecting the language of the colonisers, and adopting and rewiring their native language in the discourse, African writers can reclaim their cultural identity, overturning cultural imperialism. Thiong'o recalls how, in going to school, the language of his education was no longer the language of his culture (1986, p. 11). Lamenting and regretting the loss of their mother tongue, Chinua Achebe, in “English and the African Writer,” questions, “is it right that man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else’s? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling” (Achebe, 1997, p. 348). This sense of loss, and sense of guilt by the victims of linguistic violence, is omnipresent in indigenous and tribal cultures. The tribal populations of India, most of whom reside in the country’s tropical and subtropical zone, “were subject to double colonialism” (Kjosavik, 2011, p.123): subjugated first by Indian non-tribal people, feudal landlords; and subsequently by British, French, and Portuguese colonisers. They also endured “epistemic violence,” a concept germinated in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s reading of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault that was propounded in her seminal essay “*Can the Subaltern Speak?*”. This violence is a “remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other” (Spivak, 1988, pp.

280-281), which is invisibly moulded into the form of dominant systems of knowledge in the west, ensuring the erasure, marginalisation, silencing, and exclusion of non-western knowledge and voices. Drawing on the arguments of Spivak and Thiong'o, it is pertinent to ask: Does the Indian tribal community resist 'epistemicide', 'linguicide', and "culturecide" (Omanga, 2020, para. 5) to revive traditional forms of storytelling that were suppressed during colonial rule? In this regard, I argue that the Indian graphic novel *Bhimayana* is a rare example that seeks to invalidate a dominant oppressive knowledge production to move beyond the paradigm of western doctrines; it tries to reinvigorate a more inclusive form of storytelling that is not culturally, syntactically, and ontologically restrictive.

Bhimayana depicts the life of Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (the father of the Indian constitution), and is widely regarded as India's finest example of the genre. Dr Ambedkar was subjected to utter caste discrimination and untouchability during the colonial period of India. Through its captivating illustrations, the narrative sheds light on the harrowing experiences of Ambedkar, who belonged to the Mahad community, a caste considered untouchable by the upper-caste Hindus. Despite being highly educated, he was denied sources of pure drinking water, house rent, carriages, and medical care. Illustrated by Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam, two members of the Gond tribe, and written by Srividya Natarajan and S. Anand, the narrative presents a powerful message against the practice of untouchability and the caste system in India. *Bhimayana's* uniqueness lies in the manner the story is told: the wielding of Pradhan Gond art, a form of tribal-Indigenous art that dates back to 1400 A.D. As noted by Seth (2018, p. 1) Gond tribes "inhabit in the area where Rock paintings dating back to the Mesolithic period have been found," and "many of the Gond's customs echo that of their Mesolithic forebearers". The term Gondwana art, or Gond art, draws its nomenclature from the geomorphic legacy of Gondwana Land. Ancient Gondwana Land, amalgamated South America, Africa, Madagascar, and Australia, revealing how countries within the tropical region share an inherent bond, harkening back to their geologic and geomorphic origins.

Pradhan Gond art, which is still practiced in the central and southern Indian states, traditionally used natural pigments as colours. Most interestingly, the pattern of their art is also the embodiment of nature and myths related to forests. As Anupama Saxena observes: "horses, elephants, tigers, birds, Gods, men and objects of daily life are painted in bright hues full of life" (Saxena, 2017, p.61131). Pradhan Gond art employed in *Bhimayana* resonates with ecological essence in its structure and colours. Adopting Gond art as a storytelling tool, Illustrators or narrators not only pay homage to the cultural heritage of the Gond people, but also highlight the deep connection between indigenous art and the natural world, highlighting the profound cosmic entanglement with nature. Though the notion that human beings are inseparably entangled with nature creating an invisible apparatus maintaining the Earth's

equilibrium, became famous in the scientific community after the emergence of the Gaia hypothesis in the 1970s. The concept of Earth as an all-embracing harmonious entanglement of relations is pervasive in Indigenous knowledge systems of the tropics. The nomadic Animist societies from Asia, Africa and the Americas were nature worshippers and never separated Self and Other, “Purusha” and “Prakriti²” (Shiva, 1988, 37), Earth and human. In ancient Andean (Latin American) Inca civilisations, Mother Earth or Pachamama is placed at the centre of their worldview. Mignolo, in his *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, records how Aymara tribes of Bolivia, Peru and Chile still worship Pachamama and how this belief system has been incorporated within their contemporary lives, where the distinction between nature and culture is blurred (2011b, p. 11). For the Aymara, the Earth is not just dust from which human beings are made; rather, it is life itself, an idea that pervaded the Animist universe.

In the context of the Gond Tribe of India, Majhi and Mahapatra (2021) observe the spiritual and religious practices of the Gond people and their deep connection with the earth:

The religious thinking of the Gonds is saturated with animistic ideas. The Gonds consider the animate objects such as trees, plants, animals as well as human beings as the abode of spirits...the Gonds of Nuapada believe that the spirits live in trees. Hence, cutting down trees is against ritual norms. (p. 310)

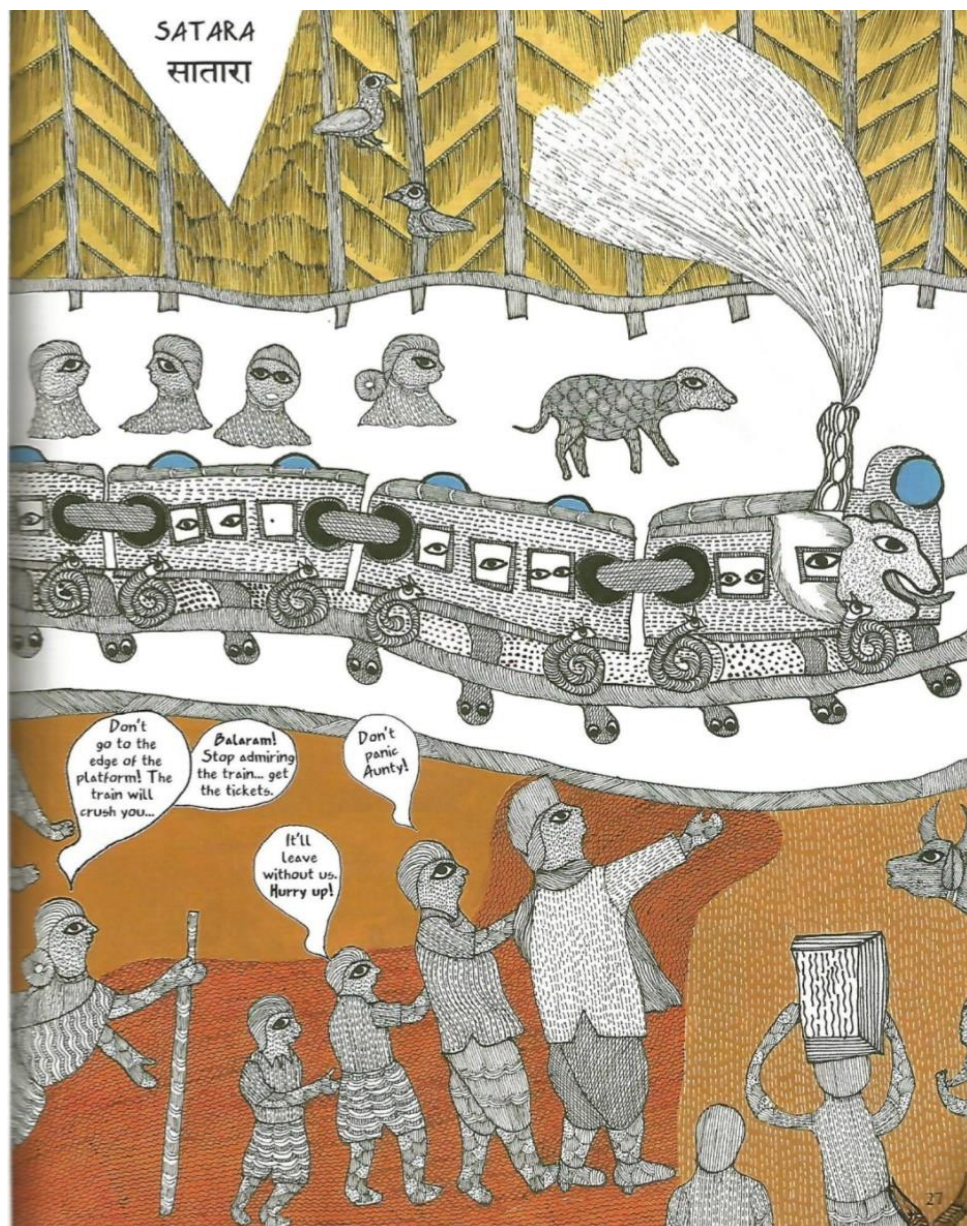
This belief that nature is a living and dynamic entity intimately connected to human beings and these worldviews of interconnectedness and embeddedness shared by multitudinous tropical and indigenous knowledge systems have suffered innumerable onslaughts of colonial ventures. Cartesian and Kantian notions consider humans as thinking, rational masters, and nature as unthinking, inert servants; creating an anthropocentric worldview that facilitated the rise of colonialism. The temperate bearing “white man’s burden” (Kipling, 1899, p. 290) ravaged the tropical countries with an everlasting quest for supremacy.

Bhimayana, with its imaginative incorporation of Gond art, can be considered a deliberate and necessary liberation from the dominant logocentric narratives set by the temperate West and an overarching reclamation of the millennium-old heritage of oral storytelling. John Berger, in his foreword to *Bhimayana*, aptly recognises the ways in which a good artist sees the universe. Berger contends that *Bhimayana* has the potential to “replace the stage of history with the body of a community. A body with a long past, a present of many voices and a vision of future” (2010, p. 9). He argues that the narrative should not be confined to “rectangular framing or unilinear time,” rather it should be “a conference of corporeal experience across generations, full of pain and

² Unlike the Western concept, in Indian cosmology person (Purusha) and nature (Prakriti) represent an inseparable complementary duality, in other words a relationality.

empathy, and nurtured by a complicity and endurance that can outlive the Market” (p. 9). S. Anand, co-author of *Bhimayana*, in Book IV, recalls how the illustrators Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam, after going through all the other existing *magnum opuses* in graphic tradition, decided to employ “their own philosophy of art to the visual imagery” (2010, p. 100). The Vyam couple note, “we will not force character into boxes. It stifles them; we prefer to mount our work in open spaces. Our art is *khulla* (open), where there’s a space for all to breathe” (p. 100) just like a human can still breathe in the nature-space garnering their ontological humility.

Figure 3. *Bhimayana*



This panel shows the juxtaposition of images, patterns, and colours attuned to the eco-tribal Gond art form. (Vyam, Vyam, Natarajan, & Anand, 2011, p. 27). Reproduced with authors’ kind permission.

Vibrant imageries of nature placed in the place of panels and gutters creates a quintessential eco-poetics of their own. The speech bubbles are not rectangular boxes but are in the figures of birds and scorpions and other natural shapes, the wheels of the train are snails, and the railway tracks are snakes (see Figure 3); the peacock's long neck serves as a road, while most other pages are filled with imageries of trees and branches, branches that are serving as a connection between characters on a single page. Apart from intricate imageries of flora and fauna, other natural entities like soil and water are also corporeally engaged in the course of the narrative. Through these vibrant, virile, and vivid nature imageries, *Bhimayana* unearths the historical injustices of the past, which have for too long denied the 'Scheduled Castes' or Dalits of India the access to the most basic and elemental of resources: pure drinking water from public sources.

The art of story-telling in *Bhimayana* can become a decolonial option for the literature of the tropics because it challenges the dominant narrative and provides an alternative perspective that is grounded in Indigenous epistemologies and a sense of being that the 'ecosystem people' (Guha & Gadgil, 1995, p. 3) share with the greater cosmic reality beyond the western concept of 'human'. *Bhimayana* exemplifies how an entire tribal community can breathe through an art of their own to convey their lived experiences and challenges.

Conclusion: Imag(in)ing a Decolonial Tropics

Tropical eco-graphic narratives contain common themes, motifs, and styles that connect the works of authors from different tropical localities. Apart from the geographical connections formed out of similar climatic conditions and flora and fauna, these texts also share an experience of being othered—whether in reference to the exotic or demonic other. The array of experiences shared in the collective consciousness and portrayed in these narratives trespasses the boundaries of languages, cartography, and discourses. The regions create a relationality out of varied races, cultures, ethnicities, and tribes that make a constellation of unity and diversity. Key themes shaping tropical literature are drawn from traditional stories, myths, and legends that are used as a way to connect with cultural heritage and challenge dominant narratives.

Imag(in)ing the tropics requires thinking in terms of indigeneity and heterogeneity. For millennia people of the tropics have shared stories through visual mediums alongside a verbal mode, but with the advent of the printing press there was an overarching shift to the logocentric. When surveying history, one witnesses how the evolution of the printed book led to the gradual excision of pictorial elements. Amitav Ghosh opines that the reduction of visual elements within texts is especially pronounced in the sphere of the novel, which went from featuring illustrations and images to being

primarily a text-based form. This trend continued well into the twentieth century, and even the word "illustration" became associated with a negative connotation. However, with the advent of the internet and the rise of new technologies, there has been a resurgence of images in literary forms, particularly graphic novels (2016, pp. 83-84).

Today, in the face of climate change, it is clear that traditional literary forms struggle to convey the scale and complexity of the issues at hand. Embracing new hybrid forms that include visual elements may aid in engaging with these urgent issues and forge a more sustainable relationship with the natural world as “the aesthetics of temporality, or visual time, in graphic novels encourages readings that take notice of the nonhuman presence in plots and narrative events” (Perry, 2018, p. 1).

It is our hope that this small selection of texts—although insufficient to capture the pluriversality of the tropical region—might nevertheless offer a glimpse of the potential of graphic narratives to decolonise ecocriticism. *Bhimayana*, *Dengue*, and *Martina and the Bridge of Time* present distinct options to confront the looming effects wrought by colonialism, a condition that continues to haunt the tropics. These narratives offer alternative modes of thinking (sustainable ecologies) that can be seen as crucial steps towards decolonisation. Each author presents a unique perspective and a necessary shift in ecocentric thinking that informs their decolonial framework.

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