



A Language Spoken with Words: Decolonization, Knowledge Production and Environmental Injustice in the Work of Abdulrazak Gurnah

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Abstract

The paper analyses the relationship between decolonization, climate change, and environmental injustice as represented in the writings of Abdulrazak Gurnah. Gurnah's work is considered an example of decolonial literature. Decolonial literature has focused on issues beyond the nature of the colonial subject, highlighting the relationship between the capitalist world economy and the formation of modern decolonial subjectivities, namely the exposure of those subjectivities to environmental injustice. The paper intends to answer the following research question: how does Abdulrazak Gurnah address the articulation between decolonization, climate change, and environmental injustice? The paper argues that Gurnah addresses such an articulation by discussing knowledge production about the colonial subject and the postcolonial self and instituting an association between environmental/climate precarity and biopolitical precarity. Building from two of Gurnah's novels—*By the Sea* and *Afterlives* – the paper debates how Gurnah's characters are afflicted by the racialization of social and economic relations and biopolitical and climate precarity. Questioning knowledge production about the colonial subject and the postcolonial self is significant because it underscores the importance of transforming how knowledge about climate change is produced. Instituting an association between environmental/climate precarity and biopolitical precarity permits debating how colonial and capitalist power structures are responsible for disseminating environmental injustice, foregrounding the epistemic importance of indigenous climate change studies. The work of Gurnah is critically analyzed, bearing in mind the need to discuss the relevance of addressing climate change and environmental injustice from the perspective of global south literature.

Keywords: Abdulrazak Gurnah; Environmental Injustice; Climate Change; Decolonialism; Africa.

Introduction

This paper builds on the need to analyze ecological issues from a global south perspective. The paper departs from a distinction between postcolonial and decolonial studies locating the work of Abdulrazak Gurnah as an example of decolonial literature. The writings of Abdulrazak Gurnah illustrate the growing interest in decolonial studies regarding climate change and environmental injustice. Decolonial literature has focused on issues beyond the nature of the colonial subject, highlighting the relationship between the capitalist world economy and the formation of modern decolonial subjectivities, explicitly concerning the exposure of the postcolonial self to environmental injustice. The paper intends to answer the following research question: how does Gurnah address the articulation between decolonialism, climate change, and ecological injustice? The paper argues that Gurnah addresses such an articulation by discussing knowledge production about the colonial subject and the postcolonial self and instituting an association between environmental/climate precarity and biopolitical precarity. The paper discusses decolonial approaches as a genre of literature developed by authors from the global south with an agenda focused on exclusion, identity, and ecological issues. The paper also debates how Gurnah has, through his books, contributed to demonstrating how literature from the global south can address ecological issues.

In his work, Abdulrazak Gurnah transitions from postcolonialism to decolonial studies through the establishment of a complex and non-linear relationship between the fate of Africans living under colonial rule during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the contemporary reality of African migrants traveling to European countries (Gurnah, 2002, 2021). The same tragedies that chastised African bodies during colonial rule—ecological degradation, diseases, famine, and war—linger in the lives of African refugees traveling to western countries in search of asylum and condemned to a condition of estrangement. Gurnah depicts the Eurocentric vision of world history and politics as reifying a mode of knowledge production whereby African colonial subjects and African postcolonial selves are treated as unwanted and tragic precarious lives condemned to exposure to the effects of environmental injustice (Gurnah, 2002, 2021).

The paper includes four sections. The first section will debate the principal concepts associated with decolonial studies and how decolonial literature has included issues about climate change and environmental injustice in its research agenda. The second and third sections will locate Abdulrazak Gurnah's work in decolonial studies, exploring how such work is relevant to the analysis of climate change and environmental injustice in the global south. The second section analyses how Gurnah addresses the articulation between decolonization, climate change, and environmental injustice by discussing, in his writings, the "geopolitics of knowledge" production about the colonial subject and the postcolonial self (Mignolo, 2002, p. 59). The third section debates how Gurnah has instituted an association between environmental and biopolitical precarity and how such an association allows him to tackle issues of environmental injustice. The concluding section will resume the paper's argument and discuss its significance.

Decolonial Studies, Climate Change, and Environmental Injustice

Postcolonial authors treat the colonial subject as exposed to precarious subjectivity due to its exotic, subaltern, or hybrid condition (Said, 1994; Spivak, 1994; Bhabha, 1994). Through

his concept of "Orientalism," Edward Said (1994) argued that the West created representations and images from the "Orient," highlighting the strangeness and exoticism of the oriental "other" (Said, 1994). Said (1994) was mainly concerned with how, through the articulation between knowledge and power, the West produced a discursive universe about the Orient that legitimized colonial rule. As Said (1994, p. 32) claims, European colonialism was based not on economic or military supremacy but on epistemic dominance. In his words (1994, p. 32), "knowledge means rising above immediacy, beyond self, into the foreign and distant [...] to have such knowledge of such a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it." Gayatri Spivak (1994) also addresses the colonial subject as the product of western domination. Spivak (1994, p. 66) claims that the western subject "pretends that it has no geopolitical determinations." Such a fiction allowed for the "imperialist constitution of the colonial subject" and the consequent construction of subalternity (1994, pp. 90–91). Subalternity is constructed through the western production of knowledge about the "other" (Spivak, 1994). Like Said, Spivak also believes that the epistemic essentialization of the non-western other is a form of political oppression frequently reified in literary and intellectual work (Spivak, 1994; Maggio, 2007, p. 420). Homi Bhabha (1994) describes cultural hybridity as a product of multiculturalism, claiming that the colonial subject is forced to embrace a hybrid nature through the imitation of the culture of the colonizer.

Spivak anticipated the need for the transcendence of postcolonialism as a theoretical approach. In his work, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present*, Spivak (1999, p. 1) argues that postcolonial studies, "when they concentrate only on the representation of the colonized or the matter of the colonies, can sometimes serve the production of current neocolonial knowledge by placing colonialism/imperialism securely in the past." As Mishra and Hodge (2005, p. 375) argue, the surpassing of postcolonialism will release "energies that have been locked into an ever more onerous task, to maintain and extend its scope in a present and future increasingly constituted in other terms." Homi Bhabha (1994) points out that postcolonial studies can only be significant if they can empower the present's transformation without reifying post-enlightenment rationalism. Decolonial studies correspond to the need for creating an "open space of afterness" in postcolonialism (Mishra & Hodge, 2005, p. 382).

Decolonization addresses the experiences and legacies of colonial imperialism from a much wider ontological and epistemological perspective than postcolonialism. Giraldo (2016, p. 160) argues that the "decolonial option operates an epistemological displacement of postcoloniality as it has been established in mainstream academia." Decolonization can, therefore, be considered as an evolution of postcolonial theory and not as being in opposition to it (Giraldo, 2016, p. 160). Building from an epistemological perspective based on "border thinking," decolonization can be defined through the concepts of "geopolitics of knowledge," "colonial difference," and "coloniality of power" (Mignolo, 2002, pp. 58–59; Quijano, 2000, p. 216).

Following Mignolo (2002, p. 59), the concept of "geopolitics of knowledge" translates to "the diversification, through history, of colonial and the imperial differences." Such a concept establishes an intrinsic association between western capitalism's evolution and western epistemology's evolution, particularly concerning the universalization of instrumental reason (Mignolo, 2002, p. 59). The universalization of instrumental reason "inscribed a conceptualization of knowledge to a geopolitical space (western Europe) and erased the possibility of even thinking about a conceptualization and distribution of

knowledge 'emanating' from other local histories," namely the Global South (Mignolo, 2002, p. 59). The concept of "geopolitics of knowledge" is deeply associated with the concept of "colonial difference" (Mignolo, 2002, pp. 58–59). Both concepts question how the universalization of a western conceptualization of knowledge allowed race to be established as an instrument of classification and domination (Giraldo, 2016, p. 161). A "difference" was, therefore, instituted between the "colonizer" and the "colonized," structuring the integrity of colonial social relations (Giraldo, 2016, p. 161). The power relations that constituted the "colonial difference" were not confined to the "colonial setting," extending beyond it and producing what decolonial literature designates as the "coloniality of being" that characterizes the experiences of the postcolonial self (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 242). Giraldo (2016, p. 161) argues that "coloniality" has endured after colonialism's end and still affects African and Latin American countries. Maldonado-Torres (2007, p. 242) claims that the concept of "coloniality of being" emerged due to the need "to thematize the question of the effects of coloniality in lived experience and not only in the mind." Another essential concept in decolonial studies is the notion of "coloniality of power" (Quijano, 2000, p. 218). Quijano (2000, p. 218) states that the concept of "coloniality of power" discusses the consequences associated with the institution of race as the main element of social classification of the world population, particularly, the "racial distribution of work," the "imposition of new 'racial' geocultural identities," and the "concentration of the control of productive resources and capital, as social relations."

Building from the main concepts developed by decolonial authors, how can a relationship be established between decolonization, climate change, and environmental injustice? As previously mentioned, postcolonial authors address the colonial subject as exposed to precarious subjectivity due to its exotic, subaltern, or hybrid condition (Said, 1994; Spivak, 1994; Bhabha, 1994). Decolonial literature has focused on issues beyond the nature of the colonial subject, highlighting the relationship between the capitalist world economy and the formation of modern decolonial subjectivities. The exposure of those subjectivities to environmental injustice and the effects of climate change is, therefore, included in the agenda of the "decolonial option" (Giraldo, 2016, p. 157). Two elements underpin the importance of decolonial literature for analyzing climate change and environmental injustice in the global south.

The first element has an epistemological nature and regards knowledge production. Following Wijsman and Feagan (2019, p. 70), recognizing the relevance of knowledge production is fundamental to "thinking" and "acting" on climate change. Studying climate change involves locating its effects on particular "historical processes" that constitute the roots of environmental injustice. Decolonial authors, namely Mignolo (2002) and Quijano (2000), through their concepts of "geopolitics of knowledge," "colonial difference," and "coloniality of power," highlight the significance of diversifying the modes of knowledge production and of articulating global subjectivity production with particular historical processes like the expansion of capitalism. Wijsman and Feagan (2019, p. 70) state that "decolonial knowledge politics" allows challenging "knowledge systems analysis to explicitly question and alter structures of power in environmental knowledge making." As the authors (Wijsman & Feagan, 2019, p. 72) claim, it is vital to discuss whose knowledge about climate change has visibility and is regarded as significant. In this context, decolonial approaches allow us to question the westernization of environmentalism and debate the ecological vulnerability of populations residing in the global south (Wijsman and Feagan, 2019, p. 72). In Wijsman and Feagan's words (2019, p. 73), "powerful nations,

organizations, and corporations' structure dominant knowledge systems through practices of empire and colonization that go hand-in-hand with environmental destruction."

The second element holds an ethical and ontological framework and concerns the acknowledgment of responsibility. Decolonial approaches consider colonialism as a source of climate change and environmental injustice (Stein, 2019). In this context, Quijano's (2000, p. 218) concept of "coloniality of power" is fundamental since it focuses on the dynamics of the capitalist world economy and the production of power relations. Decolonial approaches discuss how coloniality normalized what Stein (2019, p. 200) designates as a "modern-colonial habit of being" that separates humans from the natural world and develops a "global capitalist economic system" based on the promise of infinite and benign economic growth. Coloniality is, therefore, responsible not only for disseminating environmental injustice, specifically in the global south, but also for destructive acts of ecocide (Stein, 2019).

Knowledge Production, Ecology, and the Work of Abdulrazak Gurnah

Gurnah's work embodies the "afterness" characteristic of decolonial studies (Mishra & Hodge, 2005, p. 382). The novel *Afterlives* reveals Gurnah's adoption of a critical attitude regarding postcolonialism, which the writer represents as a theory based on "situated knowledge" (Berry, 2010, p. 20). Gurnah (2000, p. 74) claims that postcolonialism can only be true to its postmodernist crux if it can avoid the tendency to "intellectually appropriate the object of its analysis, colonize that object into a homogenized other, and perpetuate an institutional hegemony of the west" (Gurnah, 2000, p. 76).

Abdulrazak Gurnah approaches the articulation between decolonization, climate change, and environmental injustice by debating knowledge production about the colonial subject and the postcolonial self (Gurnah, 2002, 2021). In his books, Gurnah (2002, 2021) discusses the "geopolitics of knowledge" production (Mignolo, 2002, p. 59) about colonial and decolonial subjectivities and how western modes of production still determine what, in the Anthropocene, we can know about populations living in the global south, namely how they are affected by climate change.

The author's novels establish a complex relationship between individuals and their physical and moral geographies (Steiner & Olaussen, 2013, p. 1). Establishing such a relationship allows the author to focus his work on questions of identity, exclusion, and the production of subalternity (Steiner & Olaussen, 2013, p. 1; Mignolo, 2002, p. 57). Moral geographies assume particular relevance in the work of Abdulrazak Gurnah. The author's relationship with the territorial space, namely the territorial space of East Africa, is fraught with perspectivism (Lavery, 2013, p. 120). The effects of physical and emotional departure are developed by Gurnah, whose characters travel through time and space, adding layers to their already composite identities. Such identity is generated by belonging to a physical and "representational space" (Lavery, 2013, p. 121). Treating the geopolitical space as a "representational space" permits Gurnah to highlight how populations of the global south, and specifically African populations, were and are still considered unqualified to participate in the construction of modernity, which has legitimized the silencing of their voices (Lavery, 2013, p. 121; see Mignolo, 2002, p. 59).

Mignolo's (2002, pp. 58–59) concepts of "colonial difference" and "geopolitics of knowledge" are fundamental to understanding the "materiality" of Gurnah's approach to narrative fiction (Efron, 1975, p. 148) as well as his filiation within decolonial studies. What Efron (1975, p. 148) designates as the "materiality" of Gurnah's approach to narrative fiction demonstrates how the author applies in his work the concepts of "colonial difference" and "geopolitics of knowledge" (Mignolo, 2002, pp. 58–59). Gurnah's books (2002, 2021) focus on the "difference" instituted among the "colonizer" and "colonized," how such a difference structured the integrity of colonial social relations, and how coloniality and its power relations were expanded beyond the "colonial setting" (Giraldo, 2016, p. 161). The fictional characters created by Gurnah are a tribute to the writer's ability to portray Africans' experience of suffering, building from the notion of a heterogeneous other. The allocation of relevance to the idea of a heterogeneous other and the recognition of the need to diversify the modes of knowledge production signal Gurnah's preference for the "decolonial option" (Giraldo, 2016, p. 157).

In *Afterlives*, the notion of a heterogeneous other is embodied in the dialogue between the novel's two central characters: Ilyas and his brother-in-law Hamza. Both characters came from a past of deprivation, displacement, and violence, experiencing the horrors of famine, environmental degradation, and war (Gurnah, 2021). Gurnah (2021) characterizes Ilyas and Hamza as enduring displaced characters embodying a permanent status of strangeness. However, their strangeness is, in its similarity, heterogeneous. Through Hamza, Gurnah (2021) denounces the brutality of colonialism, the cruelty of poverty, and the psychological distress derived from a feeling of ongoing displacement and estrangement. Ilyas goes through a different process of subjectification. In the last pages of *Afterlives*, the author tells us about Ilyas's particular relationship with colonialism. We already knew Ilyas had voluntarily decided to join the *schutztruppe* and become an *askari*. However, the narrator tells us that after the war and while living in Germany, Ilyas became a member of the *Reichskolonialbund*, a Nazi organization whose goal was to reclaim former German colonies lost after the end of World War I (Gurnah, 2021; see Richard, 2005). Ilyas's nephew justifies to his parents the behavior of his uncle Ilyas by stating that,

The Nazis wanted the colonies back, and Uncle Ilyas wanted the Germans back, so he appeared on their marches, carrying the *schutztruppe* flag, and on platforms singing Nazi songs. So, while you were grieving for him here, Ilyas said, Uncle Ilyas was dancing and singing in German cities and waving the *schutztruppe* flag in marches demanding the return of the colonies. (Gurnah, 2021, p. 275)

In *By the Sea* (2002), the notion of a heterogeneous other is personified in the dialogue between the book's two main characters and narrators: Saleh Omar and Latif Mahmud. Saleh Omar is an asylum seeker from Zanzibar who faces racism and discrimination when he arrives in the United Kingdom searching for refuge. Latif Mahmud is also a migrant, coming from Zanzibar and working in London. Both men used to live in the same town, and events closely interconnected their life stories before they departed from their home country. The two characters face the hardships of displacement. However, they embody different migration experiences. The book revolves around the coincidence of their meeting in the United Kingdom, the clash between the events that took place when both lived in Zanzibar, and the commonalities of their present lives (Gurnah, 2002). Both men remain attached to the memories of their lives in Zanzibar, and their memories by the sea (Gurnah, 2002).

As Mignolo (2002, p. 61) argues, the concept of "colonial difference" translates the "changing faces of colonial differences throughout the history of the modern/colonial world system and brings to the foreground the planetary dimension of human history silenced by discourses centering on modernity, postmodernity, and western civilization." The characters in *Afterlives* and *By the Sea* are Gurnah's way of giving a voice to the traditionally silenced faces of colonial difference (Gurnah, 2002, 2021). The concept of "geopolitics of knowledge" conceives of the global south not as "a simple geographic location" but as an allegory for human misery generated by the expansion of global capitalism (Mignolo, 2002, p. 66). The books *Afterlives* (2021) and *By the Sea* (2002) focus on "historical experiences of marginalization" (Mignolo, 2002, p. 66). Both books can be interpreted as establishing what Mignolo (2002, p. 66) designates as a "ratio between places (geohistorically constituted) and thinking." The institution of such a ratio constitutes the essence of the "geopolitics of knowledge" (Mignolo, 2002, p. 66). In Mignolo's words, "because of the coloniality of power, the concept of being cannot be dispensed with" (Mignolo, 2002, p. 66).

In *Afterlives*, Abdulrazak Gurnah (2021) establishes a relationship between colonialism and the production of African subjectivity in the colonial context. Gurnah describes German colonial rule in East Africa as having institutionalized a regime of servitude and forced labor. Gurnah (2021) describes in his novel how two epistemic perspectives about German colonial rule in East Africa emerged, particularly after the Maji Maji rebellion. A first perspective considered the deaths of African natives opposed to German rule as "unavoidable" (Gurnah, 2021, p. 16). While Africans died of starvation, ecological degradation, diseases, and public executions, the German rulers believed that "the empire had to make the Africans feel the clenched fist of German power in order that they should learn to bear the yoke of their servitude compliantly" (Gurnah, 2021, p. 16). A second perspective, mirroring an encounter between Foucault's (2001) notion of governmentality and Quijano's (2000, p. 216) concept of "coloniality of power," argued that the production of violence and the exposure of Africans to environmental injustice were not viable paths to ensure that German colonies could become productive, contributing to the empire's wealth. Therefore, it was necessary to establish population and power technologies focused on the control of the human body (Foucault, 2001).

In *By the Sea*, Gurnah (2002) questions the meaning of the "coloniality of being" (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 242) through a discussion about the significance of knowledge production about African colonial and postcolonial realities. In a passage of the book, Latif Mahmud questions his friend Elleke, who used to live in Kenya as a European settler, about the meaning of colonialism, asking her if she thought it was correct to "go and take what belonged to other people, and call it your own and prosper on duplicity and force (...) even fight and maim for what you had no right to" (Gurnah, 2002, p. 131). In her answer, Elleke identifies one of colonialism's key characteristics, specifically, the technologies of truth production. Elleke states,

we lived at a time when it seemed we had a right to do all that, a right to places that were only occupied by people with dark skin and frizzy hair (...) that was the meaning of colonialism, and everything was done to persuade us not to notice the methods that made it possible. (Gurnah, 2002, p. 131)

Elleke recognizes, therefore, the profound moral contradictions that haunted European colonialism. In her words,

All Europeans had to observe the thin line beyond which the mysterious moral authority over the native world would vanish, and we would have to torture and murder to regain it. It was torture and murder that were committed in our name which gave us that authority in the first place. (Gurnah, 2002, p. 131)

The importance of the construction of colonial narratives intended to legitimize imperial rule is also commented on by Saleh Omar, who discusses the "stories" made up by Europeans about Africa:

The stories we knew about ourselves before they took charge of us seemed medieval and fanciful [...] a different category of knowledge which, despite our assertive observance, could not contest with theirs. And at school there was little or no time for those other stories, just an orderly accumulation of the real knowledge they brought to us, in books they made available to us, in a language they taught us. But they left too many spaces unattended [...] so, in time gaping holes began to appear in the story. (Gurnah, 2002, p. 18)

When Saleh Omar arrives in the United Kingdom, he is harassed by an immigration officer, Kevin Edelman, who tries to persuade Saleh Omar not to ask for asylum. Edelman poignantly says to Saleh Omar when he claims asylum,

How much danger is your life really in? You don't even speak the language and you probably never will [...] No one will give you a job. You will be lonely and miserable and poor, and when you fall ill there'll be no one here to look after you (...) Why you didn't stay in your own country, where you could grow old in peace? This is a young man's game, this asylum business, because it is really just looking for jobs and prosperity and all that, isn't it? There is nothing moral in it, just greed. No fear of life and safety, just greed. (Gurnah, 2002, p. 11)

The arguments employed by the immigration officer convey the traditional European narratives that attempt to normalize the idea that migrants coming from African states are greedy, deceivers, and opportunists. This genre of stereotypes about migrants coming from the global south is a western form of knowledge production.

In his article, "The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference," Walter Mignolo (2002, p. 67) writes that "because of the colonial difference, coloniality of being cannot be a critical continuation of the former, but must be rather, a relocation of the thinking and a critical awareness of the geopolitics of knowledge." The discussion about the "geopolitics of knowledge" (Mignolo, 2002, p. 59) production about the colonial subject and the postcolonial self is imperative for decolonial studies, specifically regarding the analysis of how the global south is fraught by climate change and environmental injustice. In this context, the work of Abdulrazak Gurnah embodies how decolonial literature may address the relationship between the colonial subject, the postcolonial self, environmental injustice, and climate change. In the book *Afterlives*, Gurnah poignantly describes how environmental hazards plagued already disadvantaged East African communities and how diseases like malaria and water-related illnesses were related to poor living conditions (Gurnah, 2021, p. 29). In the novel *By the Sea* (2002), the character Saleh Omar voices how, after the independence of Zanzibar, the country was besieged with uncertainty and cruelty (Gurnah, 2002, p. 150). Saleh Omar is imprisoned, sent to detention camps, and exposed to inhuman

environmental risks, particularly diseases transmitted by insects and waterborne ailments like malaria and cholera (Gurnah, 2002, pp. 231-233).

There is a paradox involved in knowledge construction about climate change. Populations from the global south have long suffered the effects of environmental injustice, ecological degradation, and climate change. Nevertheless, the knowledge considered valid about climate change is produced mainly in the West (Wijsman & Feagan, 2019). The westernization of knowledge production about climate change is one of the reasons it is necessary to approach ecological and climate issues from the epistemic perspective of the global south (Wijsman & Feagan, 2019, p. 75). In the face of a scenario of acute "anthropogenic climate change and social inequality," it becomes necessary not to reify the central knowledge systems about climate change (Wijsman & Feagan, 2019, p. 75). Therefore, de-Westernizing knowledge production about ecological issues is vital (Wijsman & Feagan, 2019, p. 75). As Wijsman and Feagan (2019, p. 75) write, knowledge production about climate change is "saturated with ongoing historical legacies of social exclusion," and understanding colonial history is fundamental to better tackling "environmental futurity in the wake of climate change." Literature from the global south can contribute to diversifying the modes of knowledge production about climate change and environmental injustice.

From the Coloniality of Power to Biopolitical and Environmental Precarity

This paper argues that Gurnah, in his work, addresses the articulation between decolonization, climate change, and environmental injustice by discussing knowledge production about the colonial subject and the postcolonial self and instituting an association between environmental/climate precarity and biopolitical precarity. As previously mentioned, decolonial approaches consider colonialism a source of climate change and environmental injustice (Stein, 2019). In this context, Quijano's (2000, p. 218) concept of "coloniality of power" is central since it discusses the dynamics of the capitalist world economy and the production of power relations. Following Quijano (2000), the concept of "coloniality of power" results from the "racist distribution of new social identities" associated with a "correspondingly racist distribution of forms of work and exploitation of colonial capitalism," whereby only the "white" Europeans could be considered citizens and receive a salary (Quijano, 2000, p. 217). Indigenous populations were, therefore, reduced to biopolitical precarity. Quijano (2000, p. 218) writes that the racialization of social and economic relations lingers as a feature of contemporaneity due to the "emergence of a Euro-centered colonial/modern world power that is still with us." According to Quijano (2000, p. 220), the Anthropocene is characterized by the naturalization of technologies of "domination/exploitation," in which race and work are articulated, and the production of identities is related to "specific forms of control of work."

Quijano's (2000, p. 216) concept of "coloniality of power" can be associated with Judith Butler's (2009) notion of precarious lives. Judith Butler (2009, p. ii) characterizes precarity as a "politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence and death." Colonial capitalism produced biopolitical and environmental precarity. In many countries from the global south, namely African countries, the postcolonial setting deepened existing conditions of biopolitical and environmental precarity, fueling migration flows. In the twenty-first century, developed countries' norms governing migration and asylum are responsible for the constitution of mainly non-western precarious bodies (Butler,

2012). In the case of undocumented migrants, stateless individuals, and asylum-seekers, precarity is frequently translated into an absence of citizenship rights, a lack which deprives them of the opportunity to claim political, civic, social, and environmental rights (Sandten, 2017, p. 2). Therefore, a relationship between biopolitical and environmental precarity was present in the colonial context and continues to plague the populations of the global south in the postcolonial setting.

The concepts of "coloniality of power" and precarity (Quijano, 2000, p. 216; Butler, 2009, p. ii) can be employed to comprehend the fictional web created by Abdulrazak Gurnah. Abdulrazak Gurnah's books may be understood as an "aesthetical tool" (Sandten, 2017) that the writer has employed to create a narrative regime where his own experience of displacement is creatively intertwined with the fictional lives of his characters, who are seldom exposed to conditions of ecological precarity, poverty, physical and emotional abuse, and forced dislocation.

In *Afterlives*, Gurnah (2021) explores the novel's characters' exposure to biopolitical and environmental precarity due to German colonialism and imperialism. The European colonization of Africa, namely East Africa, and the articulation between colonialism, imperialism, and the capitalist distribution of labor are described by Gurnah (2021), who stresses the distinction established by the Germans, and later by the British between civilized Europeans and the African "other." In the novel *Afterlives*, when describing the relationship, during the first World War, between the British and the Germans, and between Europeans and native Africans, Gurnah writes the following passage:

The German civilians were treated with the courtesies befitting the citizens of an enlightened combatant nation. [...] It would not do to have Europeans watched over and restrained by unsupervised Africans. The local Africans, who were neither citizens nor members of a nation, nor enlightened, and who were in the path of the belligerents, were ignored or robbed and, when necessity required, forcibly recruited into the carrier corps. (Gurnah, 2021, p. 107)

The denial of African identity and the assumption that African natives were not citizens and, therefore, were not under the protection of any type of legal regime demonstrate how colonialism reduced Africans to a condition of purposeful biopolitical precarity (Agamben, 1998; Butler, 2009). The nature of the *schutztruppe*, and other colonial militarized forces, was based on the notion of western racial superiority and on the normalization of the belief that Africans were half-lives destined to be instrumentalized by colonial powers (Downey, 2009, p. 109). In *Afterlives* (2021), Gurnah captures the moral superiority of colonial powers through the dialogues between Hamza and the *Oberleutnant*, the German officer with whom Hamza establishes a complex relationship. In a passage of the book, the *Oberleutnant* explains to Hamza why Germany has a right to colonial possessions in East Africa and the rationale behind the *schutztruppe*, claiming that:

I am here to take possession of what rightfully belongs to us because we are stronger. We are dealing with backward and savage people and the only way to rule them is to strike terror into them (...) and pummel all of them into obedience. The *schutztruppe*

is our instrument. You are too. We want you to be disciplined and obedient and cruel beyond our imagining. (Gurnah, 2021, pp. 85-86)

The lack of political, civic, social, and environmental rights is a feature that characterizes both the colonial subject and the postcolonial self (Mignolo, 2002). Gurnah (2002, 2021) denounces the lack of political, civic, social, and environmental rights that plagued the African populations colonized by European powers and how such a lack of rights persisted in the postcolonial context. In a passage of *By the Sea*, the character Saleh Omar chooses to baptize his newborn daughter, Raiya (Gurnah, 2002). Such a name was employed to signal the existence of a "citizen" (Gurnah, 2002, p. 150). In Omar's perspective, naming the baby Raiya would be a political utterance and a "demand that our rulers should treat us with humanity, as indigenes and citizens in the land of our birth" (Gurnah, 2002, p. 150). In the novel *By the Sea* (2002), biopolitical and environmental precarity are related to the experience of Africans in colonial and postcolonial settings. Saleh Omar personifies several processes of biopolitical reduction to bare life (Agamben, 1998) that occurred during colonialism, and postcolonialism. Omar describes the years he spent in detention camps in his home country being subject to biopolitical and environmental violence as "years written in the language of the body, and it is not a language I can speak with words" (Gurnah, 2002, pp. 230–231). Due to the violence of his country's post-independence regime, Omar is forced to flee to Europe for asylum. Gurnah describes the condition of the refugee as a status where personal identity and subjectivity are lacking. Nevertheless, the absence of identity that characterizes the refugee is an enforced condition. In Saleh Omar's words, "Without English you are even more a stranger, a refugee, I suppose, more convincing (...) You are just a condition, without even a story" (Gurnah, 2002, p. 143). Asylum-seekers are described in the novel as "strangers" living a "half-live" and as "powerless" and "tragic bodies" (Gurnah, 2002 pp. 2,5, 51). Saleh Omar is the character who best embodies the "half-live" of an asylum-seeker, "slimming up to beg admittance" to the "secure citadels" of Europe where Africans are labeled as not belonging to the European "family" and as causing "damage" to the European way of life (Gurnah, 2002, pp. 12, 31, 64). The character Saleh Omar, discussing the paradox of Europe's colonial past and its present migration and asylum policies, ironizes his condition as an asylum-seeker by saying, "as for indignity and violence, I would just have to take my chances on them – though there weren't many places you could go to avoid the first, and the second could come at you out of nowhere" (Gurnah, 2002, pp. 12)

This passage from the book *By the Sea* illustrates how coloniality normalized what Stein (2019, p. 200) defines as a "modern-colonial habit of being." Such "modern colonial habit of being" (Stein, 2019, p. 200) comprises a specific feature well addressed in the work of Abdulrazak Gurnah. Such a distinctive feature regards displacement. It is the lack of political, civil, social, and environmental rights, associated with the racialization of social and economic relations, that causes the geographic and moral displacement afflicting the main characters of *Afterlives*—namely, Hamza, Ilyas, and his sister Afiya—as well as Saleh Omar, one of the main characters of *By the Sea*. Through his books, Gurnah locates environmental injustice and ecological degradation as one of the root causes of displacement, questioning the effects of separating humans from their natural world and the consequences associated with developing a global capitalist system (Gurnah, 2002, 2021; Stein 2019).

In *Afterlives* (2021), acute environmental and biopolitical degradation condition the lives of Ilyas, Hamza, and Afiya, leaving them physically and emotionally homeless. Ilyas

is a character constantly searching for a home and a sense of belonging, which he intends to acquire through German citizenship. Ilyas' tragic death in a Nazi concentration camp is the consequence of the racialization of social relations. In the novel *By the Sea* (2002), the decision of Saleh Omar to leave his home country is explained by the ecological and political precarity the character is exposed to throughout his life. As an asylum-seeker, Omar is also a victim of racialized social relations. Saleh Omar is a target of a particular manifestation of the concept of "coloniality of power" that, based on the articulation between race and work, determines not only that asylum-seekers are not welcomed in Europe but also that asylum-seeking is a "young man's game" (Gurnah, 2002, p. 11; Quijano, 2000, p. 216). Abdulrazak Gurnah is an author who discusses how the colonial subject and the postcolonial self are struck by biopolitical and environmental precarity. The books *By the Sea* and *Afterlives* (Gurnah, 2002, 2021) illustrate how Gurnah foregrounds the relevance of indigenous voices.

In a severe anthropogenic climate change period, it is particularly significant to build on indigenous climate change studies since they can be considered valid epistemic sources of knowledge for surpassing ecological challenges (Agathangelou & Killian, 2021, p. 827; Gill, 2021). Indigenous climate change studies constitute "decolonial possibilities" that permit questioning how "colonial and enslaving extractions and grammars have immured nature and the source of existence in the making of a planetary, as their primary goal is to settle to whom the earth belongs" (Agathangelou & Killian, 2021, p. 827). Those "decolonial possibilities," so well illustrated in the work of Abdulrazak Gurnah, study how the "logics of power structuring the contemporary epoch, and thus driving the climate crisis, originate from within the very processes that subjected Indigenous peoples and African/African descendant peoples to colonization and enslavement" (Gill, 2021, p. 913). The fact that global South literature is embracing an agenda focused on ecological issues is particularly important.

Conclusion

This paper builds on the need to analyze ecological issues from a global south perspective. The paper starts by discussing decolonial approaches as a genre of literature developed by authors from the global south, with an agenda focused on exclusion, identity, and ecological issues. The work of Abdulrazak Gurnah is considered an example of decolonial approaches, illustrating how literature from the global south can discuss ecological issues. The paper explores the following research question: how does Abdulrazak Gurnah address the articulation between decolonization, climate change, and environmental injustice? The paper argues that Gurnah, in his work and through his filiation with decolonial approaches, addresses such an articulation by discussing knowledge production about the colonial subject and the postcolonial self and instituting an association between environmental/climate precarity and biopolitical precarity.

Questioning knowledge production about the colonial subject and the postcolonial self is particularly significant because it underlines the importance of transforming how knowledge about climate change is produced, contributing to the de-westernization of knowledge about ecological issues. Instituting an association between environmental/climate precarity and biopolitical precarity is also relevant. It permits debating how colonial and capitalist power structures are responsible for disseminating environmental injustice, foregrounding the epistemic importance of indigenous climate change studies.

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