

“*Naturalizing Africa* is an essential addition to environmental studies in Africa. Iheka has an impressive command of the interface between human communities and non-human ecologies and the way literature can illuminate some of the most vital environmental challenges of our time.”

Rob Nixon, Currie C. and Thomas A. Barron Family Professor in the Humanities and the Environment, Princeton University

“Through its focus on non-human agency and what Cajetan Iheka calls ‘the proximity’ of human and non-human actors, *Naturalizing Africa* offers an innovative approach to the role African literary studies can play in addressing environmental degradation and injustice in Africa. It represents an insightful and significant contribution to literary, postcolonial, and environmental studies.”

Byron Santangelo, Professor of English, University of Kansas

“Cajetan Iheka delivers a beautifully researched referendum on the Eurocentric limitations of both Enlightenment and postcolonial thought, seeking to relocate African ecocriticism and environmental activism in a primarily indigenous African understanding of the relations of humans with non-humans. His delineation of an ‘aesthetics of proximity’ as a means of representing multispecies relationships adds yet another dimension to the most progressive scholarship in animal studies, ecocriticism, and the new materialism.”

Stephanie LeMenager, Moore Endowed Professor, Department of English, University of Oregon

“Brilliantly countering the anthropocentrism of much ecocritical scholarship on African literatures, Cajetan Iheka’s *Naturalizing Africa* offers important new interventions into African, postcolonial, and environmental studies. Through its skillful, expert analyses of literary representations of ecological crises from across the African continent, this book also contributes significantly to envisioning alternative, sustainable ecosystems.”

Karen L. Thornber, Professor of Comparative Literature, Harvard University

“Cajetan Iheka’s *Naturalizing Africa* is an eloquent, theoretically sophisticated contribution to the growing body of ecocritical work engaged with the Global South. This book vividly illuminates the cultural causes of and responses to Africa’s environmental crises, using carefully chosen examples from various sub-Saharan regions.”

Scott Slovic, Professor of English, University of Idaho and coeditor of *Ecocritical Aesthetics: Language, Beauty, and the Environment* and *Ecocriticism of the Global South*

“Iheka’s *Naturalizing Africa* is a book that is uncanny in its prescience. Synthesizing a range of debates in environmental, animal, and African literary studies, it not only elaborates the grounds of current debates in these fields but also illuminates a pathway for what is to come. This is going to be of tremendous influence for a very long time.”

Ato Quayson, Professor and Director of the Centre for Diaspora and Transnational Studies, University of Toronto



## Naturalizing Africa

The problem of environmental degradation on the African continent is a severe one. In this book, Cajetan Iheka analyzes how African literary texts have engaged with pressing ecological problems in Africa, including the Niger Delta oil pollution in Nigeria, ecologies of war in Somalia, and animal abuses across the continent. Analyzing narratives by important African writers such as Amos Tutuola, Wangari Maathai, J. M. Coetzee, Bessie Head, and Ben Okri, Iheka challenges the tendency to focus primarily on humans in the conceptualization of environmental problems and instead focuses on how African literature demonstrates the interconnection and “proximity” of human and nonhuman beings. Iheka proposes a revision of the idea of agency based on human intentionality in African literary criticism and postcolonial studies. He argues that the narratives yoke the exploitation of Africans to the despoliation of the environment and recommend responsibility toward human and nonhuman beings as crucial for ecological sustainability and addressing climate change.

Cajetan Iheka is an assistant professor of English, specializing in African and Postcolonial Literatures, at the University of Alabama. He is an editor for *African Studies Review*, the journal of the African Studies Association.

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# Naturalizing Africa

*Ecological Violence, Agency, and Postcolonial  
Resistance in African Literature*

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Cajetan Iheka  
*University of Alabama*



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For Keji,  
Kamsi,  
and the unborn  
My Loves, ndi o ga diri mma





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## Introduction: Naturalizing Africa

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This book was conceived in the wake of an ecological disaster that occurred, remarkably, not in Africa but in the United States. This was the 2010 BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. When this event occurred, I had been in the United States for a few months, having arrived from Nigeria in the fall of 2009 for graduate school. The BP spill was my introduction to the world of sensational, image-driven coverage by the American media, but it was also a lesson in geopolitics, history, and narrative positioning—all subjects that fascinated me. More importantly, I was amazed at the reporting on the spill, the Obama administration's relatively swift response to it, and the fact that BP's then CEO flew to the United States to take charge of the company's mitigation of the aftermath of the disaster. All these were captivating because I had just arrived from a country where oil spills are a regular occurrence: the communities of the Niger Delta sit in a region despoiled by continuous environmental devastation since 1956, when oil was discovered in commercial quantities. As I followed the disaster in America, the contrast with the Nigerian scenario where oil companies and government at different levels ignore damage caused by frequent oil spills, gas flaring, and other forms of environmental degradation became more glaring and disturbing.<sup>1</sup>

The contrast between the handling of similar incidents in Nigeria and the United States prompted my interest in literary representations of Africa's environmental crises, beginning of course with the Niger Delta oil exploration that is so close to home. I favor literary narratives here for their important role in elucidating and informing "our ideas about catastrophic and long-term environmental challenges."<sup>2</sup> But the more I looked, the more I grappled with the paucity of scholarship on the subject. Moreover, the few studies that existed focused primarily on the effects of environmental tragedies on humans in the affected areas, often leaving out the nonhuman world or merely glossing over its relevance for the human population. Nonhumans, in this context, encompass the other life forms in the environment, including plants, animals, and forests but also the abiotic components of the ecosystem including soil and water.