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SUSIE O'BRIEN

I am interested in what resilience means for a postcolonial environmental humanities. In this context, I understand resilience through two different lenses: scientific/scholarly, and cultural/popular. The first describes the new way of thinking about the relationship of organisms within an ecosystem and the shape of their interactions that emerged in the 1970s from C. S. Holling's research on spruce budworms in the Northern boreal forest. Ecosystems, Holling showed, are defined not by a single optimal state, but by multi-scalar processes of continual transformation, whose very diversity and instability define the system's resilience to external disruption—a discovery with important implications for ecological management.

The second way I understand resilience is as part of a popular discourse. I mean popular both in the sense of ordinary and fashionable.¹ In this latter sense, resilience—as it has been taken up in business, psychology, social policy, military studies, and education—while retaining the ecological sense of describing a system's capacity to deal with change, has taken on a much more strongly normative flavor. Associated with words like optimism, flexibility, fitness, and innovation, it takes on the aura of a moral imperative that is both engaging and troubling.

What is engaging is its provision of a template of transformation, allowing us to articulate the capacity of individuals and cultures to thrive in the face of massive upheaval. The idea is not just metaphorical. A key insight of resilience ecology is recognition of the intersection of social and natural systems. Resilience therefore has particular relevance

to a postcolonial ecocriticism in which survival and adaptation is an interspecies affair: it allows us to recognize the importance of diversity and flexibility in confronting the unprecedented level and magnitude of hazards we all face together.

Only we don't face them exactly together. One of the critical functions of postcolonialism is to illuminate the history of violent conquest. This is important not only in the sense of memorializing and remediating loss, but also of understanding the historical determinants of present forms of domination and patterns of inequality. Resilience theory does not so much disregard these patterns as overwrite them with the concept of turbulence—an element of social and ecological systems that is seen as not just natural but critical to their optimal functioning. A disturbing implication of this way of thinking is that, as Christopher Zebrowski puts it, “if resilience is enhanced through ‘real’ disasters, then experience with these events is not necessarily completely undesirable—indeed they are opportunities to enhance resilience and test the morphogenetic properties of society.”² This chilling logic resonates with a number of contexts in which resilience enjoys popular currency: character education, where children are encouraged to learn through failure, the attack, in social policy, on dependency culture, and the focus in business of change management, and—underlying them all—the capitalist logic of creative destruction.

I said resilience signified in two ways. The difference may be less than it appears. Melinda Cooper and Jeremy Walker effectively show how the principles of ecological resilience theory and those of neoliberal economics got tangled together in the cauldron of 1970s anti-authoritarianism. At the same time as Holling and his colleagues were challenging the principles of top-down ecological management, Friedrich Hayek was deriving his economic theory that formed the basis of contemporary neoliberalism. The key tenet of this theory is that the economy functions best when left to its own natural rhythms of volatility. Any attempt at regulation or redistribution would harm the resilience of the system. Contemporary models of social-ecological resilience, of which, as Walker and Cooper note, the Stockholm Resilience Alliance is exemplary, find comfortable resonance with this neoliberal philosophy.³ Walker and Cooper further note that it is almost impossible to challenge resilience theory because of the infinitely incorporative

capacity of its systems logic, such that interruptions and contradictions are always already accounted for.⁴

It is also difficult to challenge because it offers a sliver of hope: that all is not lost, that ecosystems, imagined as complex amalgams of human and more-than-human lives, can adapt to and even flourish through change. Maybe then resilience can best be characterized in the way Gayatri Spivak describes liberalism, as “that which we cannot not want.”⁵ The hallmark of social and ecological systems that have learned to adapt to violent disruption, resilience in its increasingly normative invocation risks becoming a legitimation of—even a spur to—increasing turbulence. Let’s keep the term, I say, but keep it in its place, in a constellation of other values, including historical consciousness, justice, care, and resistance. And also critique, which is where environmental humanities scholarship comes in.

NOTES

1. Touted as word of the year for 2012 (Bergman, “Resilience”; Juniper, “Will 2012 Be the Year of the R Word?”), “resilience” features in the title of at least one other journal launched in 2013 (*Resilience: International Policies, Practices and Discourses*).
2. Zebrowski, “Governing the Network Society.”
3. Walker and Cooper, “Genealogies of Resilience,” 145.
4. Walker and Cooper, “Genealogies of Resilience,” 157.
5. Spivak, “Bonding in Difference.”

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