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ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rgrl20

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To cite this article: Subarna De (05 Oct 2023): The Return of Nature: Decolonial Reinhabitation and Self-Indigenisation in Kodagu, India, Green Letters, DOI: 10.1080/14688417.2023.2260802

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2023.2260802

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Published online: 05 Oct 2023.

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GREEN LETTERS: STUDIES IN ECOCRITICISM
https://doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2023.2260802

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The Return of Nature: Decolonial Reinhabitation and Self-Indigenisation in Kodagu, India

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ABSTRACT
This essay contextualises the ecological and cultural practices of the Kodagu coffee plantations of Southern India within the post-/decolonial framework of bioregional reinhabitation. Given that reinhabitation is an essential domain in bioregional thought and practice that aims to restore and maintain the natural systems of an injured land, this essay explores the depiction of indigenous practices on Kodagu's plantations in Kavery Nambisan's *The Scent of Pepper* (2010). Analysing the complex interrelationships between the reinhabitory practices on the plantations and Kodagu's environment, this essay argues that bioregional reinhabitation in Kodagu takes a decolonial approach to transform the non-native coffee into a bioregional crop in Kodagu and, in the process, foregrounds self-indigenisation as a prominent decolonial reinhabitory strategy in indigenous environments of crises.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 30 January 2023
Accepted 5 September 2023

KEYWORDS
Kodagu/Coorg; coffee plantation; postcolonial bioregionalism; decolonial reinhabitation; self-indigenisation; indigeneity

> 'He listened to the sound of trees being split into logs – the smell of bleeding wood'.
>
> *(Nambisan 2010, 262)*

Introduction

Since the mid-nineteenth century, the replacement of forests with plantations has been a significant environmental problem worldwide. India has experienced massive environmental degradation since the advent of European colonisation. The European administrators 'established exclusive power to utilise and govern forest areas in India', dismantling the indigenous forest management systems (Bathija and Sylvander 2023, 1). The Indian Forest Act of 1878 allowed the colonisers to clear huge mountain forests to establish tea plantations in the foothills of the Himalayas in North India and rubber and coffee plantations in South India (Gadgil and Guha 1995, 40). Kodagu, situated on the eastern slope of the Western Ghats in Southern India, lost its native ecology to coffee plantations.[1] In 1878, the European colonisers started burning Kodagu's forested mountain slopes to introduce coffee monoculture and continuous cultivation (Gadgil and Guha 2012, 125; Nambisan 2010, 57).[2] Despite the continued 'global thinning of species' for over two centuries, the twenty-first century ecologically marks the massive dimension

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of this anthropogenic crisis (Marland 2020, 421). Kodagu's indigenous people, the 'Kodava' people, recognised this ecological breakdown in the early twentieth century and countered the colonial coffee plantation culture with their indigenous practices.[3] In 1910, they started reintroducing native vegetation to Kodagu's transformed landscape, which helped revive the native ecosystem and facilitated the return of nature to colonial Kodagu.[4] Note that this essay does not politicise nature; instead, 'nature' here refers to the precolonial Kodagu indigenous landscape––that is, the entire physical world, including both humans and more-than-humans (Castree 2005, 1; Habgood 2002, 4).

The practice of restoring injured lands and maintaining sustainability is bioregional reinhabitation (Berg and Dasmann 1978; McGinnis 1999).[5] The political foundation of bioregional reinhabitation predominantly addresses settler claims to land rather than indigeneity.[6] The founding bioregionalists Peter Berg and Raymond F. Dasmann (1978) and other prominent bioregionalists – including Wes Jackson (1994), Stephanie Mills (1995), Michael Mason (1997), Bruce Evan Goldstein (1999), Michael V. McGinnis 1999; 2005), Elizabeth Dodd (2000), Kirkpatrick Sale (2000), John Lein (2003), and Serenella Iovino (2012) – emphasise the importance of 'learning' from the local/indigenous people to 'become native to place' as the first strategy of reinhabitation. Here 'learning' unambiguously refers to the settlers' trial-and-error process of adapting to an unknown/indigenous environment rather than indigenous people reinhabiting their land.[7] I identify this bioregional reinhabitation as settler reinhabitation and the indigenous people's reinhabitation of their land as indigenous reinhabitation, which I argue is decolonial.

Erin James identifies the problem of addressing non-Western place sensitivity within bioregional literary imagination and highlights the need for postcolonial bioregional criticism (2012, 263–264, 272). The aesthetics of place in colonial and post-colonial time-frames holds the potential to be interpreted from a postcolonial perspective, and thus bioregions with colonial histories, such as Kodagu, become postcolonial bioregions.[8] However, it is problematic to interpret Kodagu's bioregional *reinhabitation* as *postcolonial* because the 'post' in '*post*colonialism refers to "after" the demise of colonialism' (Shohat 1992, 102); i.e. 'only to that period after colonisation' (Dirlik 1994, 339). Hence, to say reinhabitation is postcolonial would create an 'ambiguous spatio-temporality' and limit reinhabitory practices within the post-colonial period *only*, rather than understanding reinhabitory practices across colonial, post-colonial, and contemporary timeframes (Shohat 1992, 102). Also, postcolonialism fails to connect 'critiques of discourses and representation to the realities of people's lives' (McEwan 2019, 1), and instead strives to intervene and legitimise the non-West from a 'sense of realism and rootedness' (James 2012, 273; Young 2003, 2, 6). As a result, postcolonial interpretations of reinhabitation will end up simultaneously equating indigenous reinhabitory practices with settler lived-in experiences of Western bioregional assumptions. Thus, interpreting and juxtaposing postcolonialism with reinhabitation is misleading and will be a fundamental flaw in the conceptual understanding of bioregional reinhabitation in Kodagu.

In this essay, I depart from the Western ideology of settler reinhabitation and dig deeper into indigenous reinhabitation from decolonial perspectives. Wendell Berry (2006, 2015) and Joseph Wiebe (2021) identify ethical problems of bioregional claims to land within indigenous/postcolonial environments and mention the need for a decolonial bioregional framework. I understand that Kodagu's indigenous reinhabitory practices

throughout the colonial and post-colonial timeframes do not adapt the Western coffee cultivation practices 'to produce a more just and equitable relation' between the West and the non-West (Young 2003, 7). Instead, Kodagu's reinhabitation emphasises 'undoing' Western practices and epistemologies by breaking Western binaries of human vs nature to initiate 'epistemic reconstitution' and 'take control' of the place (Mignolo and Walsh 2018; Quijano 2000). Hence, I interpret Kodava indigenous reinhabitory practices as decolonial.

Understanding the complex spatial-historical boundaries of Kodagu that include the colonial, post-colonial and contemporary lived-in experiences, I situate decolonial reinhabitation within the postcolonial bioregional frame of reference. Postcolonialism and decolonisation both centre around Western colonial experiences. However, it is important to note that the differences between postcolonial and decolonial are historical and conceptual. Historically, the colonial experiences of America and the European Renaissance led to the foundations of the decolonial school of thought at the Bandung conference of 1955. In contrast, postcolonialism originated from India's colonial history (Bhambra 2014; Mignolo and Walsh 2018). Conceptually, decolonisation/decoloniality was founded on Aníbal Quijano's concepts of 'coloniality of power' and 'coloniality of knowledge' to take back control of the state by dismantling the social, political, and economic controls of the colonies in Latin America, Asia and Africa. On the other hand, postcolonialism emerged as an intellectual movement developing around the ideas of Edward W Said, Homi K Bhabha, and Gayatri C Spivak to discuss colonial experiences of India and Palestine, addressing material and socio-economic issues within the realm of culture studies. As discussed earlier, postcolonialism is restricted to a particular epoch: only to the period after colonisation (Bhambra 2014; Dirlik 1994; Mignolo and Walsh 2018; Shohat 1992). Decolonisation, however, is not restricted to any timeframe and addresses multiple cultures with colonial experiences. The main aim of postcolonial bioregionalism, however, is to register the ongoing colonial discourses on a former colony and engage with indigenous perspectives. Elizabeth DeLoughrey argues that a 'lack of engagement with the postcolonial and Indigenous perspectives' still exists; hence, 'cultural geographies and methods are still insufficient to address a complex crisis of planetary scale' (DeLoughery 2019, 2). Decolonial reinhabitation, I argue, will mend this gap in colonial and postcolonial environments. To substantiate my argument, I contextualise the collective Kodava indigenous grassroots practices in Kavery Nambisan's place-based novel *The Scent of Pepper* (2010) to explore bioregional reinhabitation's capacity for decolonisation.[9]

Kavery Nambisan, a contemporary Kodava novelist, is a medical practitioner at the Tata Coffee Hospital in Kodagu. She was born in the Palangala village in south Kodagu and is one of the first Kodava writers to write in English about the community's indigenous practices, its ancestral stories, and the environmental history of Kodagu since pre-colonial times.[10] Her historical fiction *The Scent of Pepper* (Nambisan 2010) documents the traditional Kodava lifeway, oral traditions, indigenous agricultural methods, cultural festivals, and lived-in experiences across three generations. In doing so, the novel constructs a realistic vernacular historiography. The novel spans the precolonial and colonial periods, beginning around 1834 and ending with the national uprising in the 1940s that led to Indian independence. Mainly set in Athur, Polibetta, and Madikeri in Kodagu, the novel presents the colonial history of the propagation of coffee in Kodagu through a description of how Nanji, a strong-headed dominant female persona, manages the Kaleyanda

household, her in-laws' house, the family's paddy fields, and the coffee plantations (De 2022c, 36). Significantly, the novel illustrates the Kodagu creative ecology, in which indigenous biodiverse farming replaces colonial coffee monoculture and transforms plantations into native forests (De 2022b). A bioregional reading of this novel helps us understand how the temporal and societal transformation had significant impacts on the Kodagu landscape (De 2022a, 223), and how Kodava indigenous knowledge is rooted in its environed ecologies.[11] I choose Nambisan's *The Scent of Pepper* as a theoretical inspiration to advance the concept of decolonial reinhabitation within literary bioregionalism because *The Scent of Pepper* is set in a particular place (Kodagu), depicts particular epochs (approximately the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries), and documents place-based Kodava grassroots practices that reflect local cosmology, Kodagu's more-than-human lifeways, and the indigenous knowledge that counters colonial visions. More importantly, the novel's power to address social intentions and human elements through storytelling and literary narrative makes it a milestone text of post-/decolonial community building in Kodagu.

This essay explores the Kodagu reinhabitory practices on their plantation landscapes during the colonial period (approximately 1878–1947) and post-colonial period (1947 – late 1950s) and argues that Kodava reinhabitation takes a decolonial approach to transforming the non-native coffee into a bioregional crop in Kodagu. Understanding the community's deep cultural connection with its land and landscapes, this essay demonstrates how the reinhabitory practices depicted in literature help produce place-based identity or 'bioregional identity' and identify the role of humans in indigenous environments of crises.[12] In identifying the role of humans, this essay engages with the concept of 'self-indigenisation' (Pearson and Wolfe 2013). My purpose is to show: first, how the Kodava people reinhabit their bioregion; second, how bioregional reinhabitation in Kodagu is decolonial and encourages self-indigenisation; and third, how this bioregional reinhabitation helps fight the environmental degradation and has successfully restored the Kodagu bioregion from being pushed into a precarious ecological crisis. In order to do so, I will argue that decolonial reinhabitation maintains sustainability, revives 'natureculture' relationships (Haraway 2004, 210), and provide a workable solution for restoring injured indigenous landscapes.[13] In the sections that follow, I first justify the methodological appropriateness of bioregional reinhabitation in Kodagu and argue that reinhabitation in Kodagu is decolonial. I then introduce the concept of self-indigenisation and argue that it is central to decolonial reinhabitation in Kodagu. I conclude by summarising how the concept of decolonial reinhabitation introduced in this essay makes a significant contribution to postcolonial bioregionalism.

Reinhabitation, bioregion, Kodagu

Bioregional reinhabitation is a 'biospheric idea', and the 'biosphere is something we all share' (Moretti 2015, 221). Western scholars have argued that bioregional reinhabitation restores biotic provinces, ecosystems, and bioregions from ecological and climate crises (Berg and Dasmann 1978; McGinnis 1999). This requires communities to participate in bioregional living; in essence, organising most economic, social, and cultural activity around naturally defined regions, or bioregions. 'Bioregion' is an ecocritical concept that refers to 'the geographical terrain and a terrain of consciousness – to a place and

the ideas that have developed about how to live in that place' (Berg and Dasmann 1978, 218). The bioregional concept of living-in-place means 'following the necessities and pleasures of life as they are presented by a particular site and evolving ways to ensure long-term occupancy of that site', and reinhabitation means learning to live-in-place in an injured land (Berg and Dasmann 1978, 217–218), that is, damaged and exploited land that has been altered by human activities such as clearcutting, monoculture, continuous cultivation, industrial agriculture, and considering land as a commodity, and natural calamities such as wildfires.

Kodagu, also known as Coorg, is a bioregion because its geography, ecology, and culture are distinct from the adjacent regions, and it is a 'life-place' to the indigenous Kodava community (Belliappa 2004, xvii; Thayer 2003).[14] In the Kannada language, 'Kodagu' means mountains, referring to its mountainous topography of moist black alluvial soil and evergreen forests (Proctor 1986, 228; Richter [1870] 2010, 4). It is situated at an elevation of about 4500 feet above sea level and covers an area of about 4102 square kilometres (Vinutha, Urs, and Janardhana 2014, 24). The regions surrounding Kodagu are the 'woody tracts of Malabar (Wynád) [Wayanad]' on its south, the dry mountains of South Canara (Tulu) on its north and west, and the tableland of Mysore on its east (Chisholm 1922, 91–92; Richter [1870] 2010, 1). In precolonial times, the Kodava people were primarily hunter – gatherers with small acreages of land where they cultivated paddy, their staple diet (Belliappa 2004, xvii; Nambisan 2010, 26; Poonacha 1997; Thurston 1913, 13–14, 125, 194). The Kodava traditional festival of Puthari is associated with the paddy harvest, and the Kodava people sing rejoicing songs and dance for the 'all-important festival of new rice' (Nambisan 2010, 188). Gary Snyder observes that 'local song and dance' are indicators of the bioregional identity of people and place (2013, 49–50). In Kodagu, the traditional songs and dances are integral to the traditional culture because they focus on the interconnectedness between the human and the more-than-human, including their ancestors, that helped the Kodava reinhabitors identify themselves with their 'life-place' (Thayer 2003, 3, 66). They had a distinct 'natureculture' relationship (Haraway 2004, 210), and their indigenous identity and traditional belief system were rooted in their land and landscape (Belliappa 2004, iii).[15] From a bioregional perspective, they were living-in-place.

However, in 1878, the European colonisers introduced the non-native coffee *Coffea arabica/robusta* from Ceylon to Kodagu (McCook 2006, 177–178; Nambisan 2010, 57, 83–84; Richter [1870] 2010, 24–25, 81, 95).[16] The replacement of the native biodiversity with non-native coffee led to massive topsoil erosion and an immense loss of native biodiversity, threatening Kodagu's ecosystem and transforming the place into an injured land (Pretty 2002, 40; Proctor 1986, 229; Venkatesh et al 2011, 281). Berg and Dasmann identify the colonial practice of removing 'one [native] species or native people after another to make a living' for themselves (colonisers/settlers) as the settler motif or 'invader mentality' (Berg and Dasmann 1978, 217).[17] This colonial invader mentality uprooted and displaced the Kodava indigenous natureculture lifeway: food, ecology, occupation, and culture. Towards the beginning of the twentieth century, the Kodava people, who had been hunter–gatherers and agriculturalists, embraced the colonial coffee plantation culture. *The Scent of Pepper* narrates the enthusiasm of the Kodava community elder, Rao Bahadur Madaiah, Nanji's father-in-law, when he buys 'one hundred and twelve acres of newly-planted coffee and five thousand battis of land in Athur' in the late nineteenth century for

his son Baliyanna, Nanji's husband (Nambisan 2010, 10). Buying colonial plantations from the British planters in Kodagu became a new trend in colonial India. Nanji's son Subbu attempted to make a deal to purchase a 'two-hundred-acre estate with a bungalow' from Edward Rice, who was about to leave Kodagu and return to England (242). These passages illustrate how coffee, the new economic crop introduced by the European colonisers, changed the attitude of the Kodava people towards their ancestral land as they adopted the invader mentality and began to view their native land as a commodity, something that could be 'assigned a value and exchanged' (Lane 2013, 319; Marx and Engels 1988, 30).

The colonial practice of monoculture coffee cultivation continued until the Kodava people recognised the severe ecological imbalances in their forest ecosystems that injured their land and marginalised the indigenous inhabitants who depended on the forests' resources (Gadgil and Guha 1995). To counter the looming ecological crisis and restore their natureculture relationships, around 1910, the Kodava people began to reinhabit their ancestral land by growing coffee under native shade trees (Biénabe 2013, 240; Nambisan 2010, 35). The Maplahs, an indigenous trading community from the adjacent state of Kerala in India who traded fish for Kodagu's native fruits and crops, suggested to Nanji that Kodagu, with its heavy rains and months of dry weather, was ideal for growing coffee under native shade trees and cultivating pepper along with coffee on the plantations (Nambisan 2010, 34–35). Although the non-native coffee remains the economic engine of the Kodagu bioregion, even today, Kodagu's coffee plantations follow the indigenous farming methods of growing coffee together with pepper under native shade trees (Biénabe 2013). This shows how the Kodava people contested the Western practices, instead of adapting them, and integrated coffee into their indigenous system to reinhabit Kodagu. Here, 're' in reinhabitation does not encourage a 'simple return to the past' of living in pristine forest spaces; instead, Kodava reinhabitation envisions a 'new-old process' to 'live adaptively' (Lynch, Glotfelty, and Armbuster 2012, 14, 18) and reorient towards a decolonial process of indigenising coffee. This indigenous method of growing coffee helps revive the native ecology of the place and maintain sustainability, which ensures long-term living in a site that aims to maintain social, economic, technological, cultural, and ecological balance without compromising the human and more-than-human life in that specific region (Berg and Dasmann 1978; Hasna 2007; Sverdrup and Svensson 2002). The primary purpose of bioregional reinhabitation is to restore the ecology and maintain sustainability. Interestingly, in Kodagu, the indigenous reinhabitory practices register the indigenous cultures, practices, and their heritage that contest settler colonialism and 'place the human in nature, a significant difference from dominant Anglo-American environmental trajectories' (DeLoughrey and Handley 2011, 16). Hence, the associations between Kodava indigenous ecological practices and environmental concerns suggest a decolonial approach to reinhabiting Kodagu.

How is reinhabitation in Kodagu decolonial?

Decolonisation is not static (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 17). It is not 'individual' but 'communal', 'contextual, relational, practice-based, and lived' (11, 19; Anzaldúa 2015, 7–8). The decolonial school of thought is not political as much as it is epistemological. Decolonisation does not by any means politicise indigeneity to aim for Western

liberation.[18] Instead, decolonisation is the 'undoing of colonialism' (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 120); decoloniality is a 'mode of critical thought' that delinks from Western epistemologies and 'reconstitute[s]' place-based 'knowledge structure', 'production', and 'practice' (Bhambra 2014, 115; Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 5). *The Scent of Pepper* describes how the colonial plantations of Kodagu – such as 'Belquarren, the hundred acres farm that belonged to the Foxes', Meachlands, Windsor Estates, Solyglen, and Grasmere, all British estates in Kodagu – practised monoculture and continuous cultivation of coffee since 1878 (Nambisan 2010, 47, 49). In these plantations, the coffee beds 'were laid forty inches across with eight-inch walks between them', and 'rocks, roots, weeds, were removed, the beds dug deep, a few inches of topsoil from the walks scooped off and worked into the beds' (90). The coffee plantations owned and managed by the Kodava people were very different from the 'disciplined' British plantations (82). From 1910 onwards, the Kodava people always planted the non-native coffee under native wide-spreading shade trees such as mango, jackfruit, sandalwood, orange, and fig trees, in warm and low-lying plantations (40, 51, 86, 94, 105, 107–108, 192, 231). In addition, they cleared acres of coffee and replaced them with acres of bitter lemon, pepper and cardamom, thus introducing native biodiverse farming on their plantations (8, 11, 82, 153).

The two different methods of coffee cultivation in Kodagu starkly illustrate how the indigenous method of biodiverse farming on the plantations and growing coffee under native trees debunk Western epistemologies of monoculture coffee cultivation in Kodagu, as the Kodava community reconstructed their relationship with nature and resituated their indigenous ecological knowledge system on their coffee plantations. Estelle Biénabe calls the Kodava indigenous biodiverse farming 'agro-forestry systems' and argues that this is 'a characteristic feature' of Kodagu that 'contributes greatly to Coorg's image', providing a cultural identity for the local Kodava coffee growers (2013, 240). Over the last hundred years, indigenous ecological knowledge in conservation and restoration activities on colonial plantations has restored much of Kodagu's functional native biodiversity and topsoil and reversed the damage caused by monoculture and continuous coffee cultivation. In this way, coffee has become a bioregional crop in Kodagu. I consider this indigenous method of coffee cultivation to be decolonial reinhabitation because it emphasises the 'undoing' of Western epistemologies and practices (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 120), and instead establishes the domination of indigenous knowledge and practices to restore the colonial spaces of crises.

From childhood, members of the Kodava community are given hands-on experience using their indigenous knowledge and practising nourishment and maintenance of their soil: 'from the age of three [Nanji] had walked in the fields', 'at five she had worked with her grandmother, sowing, transplanting and cutting paddy', and 'at seven she had squatted with the Yeravas beneath coffee bushes to prune them before the rains' (Nambisan 2010, 22–23). Working in the fields with elders gives children the privilege of cultivating 'an aesthetics of belonging' from an early age while experiencing and practising their indigenous knowledge and agricultural techniques (DeLoughrey and Handley 2011, 30). Maintaining the soil as part of their daily chores since childhood breaks away from the Western binaries of human vs nature and enriches their ecological connection to their land so that the Kodava women regard the land and soil as their home, their identity. Moreover, in the Kodava belief system, passing indigenous knowledge to the next generation (through practical training) is a blessing.

Thus, Kodagu's decolonisation has prioritised Kodagu indigenous knowledge systems (referred to as indigenous epistemology in indigenous geographical studies) within their bioregional reinhabitory framework. In addition, the decolonial reinhabitory practice contests Western epistemologies of coffee cultivation in Kodagu rather than adapting Western practices. For example, Nambisan writes that the British plantations were 'fully exposed to the sun' and hence 'decayed easily', whereas the indigenous Kodava plantations continually produced more coffee than the British plantations and 'outlived generations of proprietors' (Nambisan 2010, 86). *The Scent of Pepper* narrates how Nanji and then Subbu grow up to own and preserve the native trees, water bodies, and other natural markers on their ancestral plantations, which they consider a blessing from their ancestors. These ancestral plantations contribute to the meaning-making processes in their indigenous epistemologies that reveal histories of interdependence between the human and the more-than-human world (Egya 2020, 69), helping them to reinhabit their ancestral plantations.

More importantly, *The Scent of Pepper* records that after consistent years of less coffee production and erosion of topsoil, the British colonisers, such as Edward Rice in Kodagu, realised that coffee is a tropical crop and that they needed to learn the Kodava experience and follow Kodagu's indigenous methods of growing coffee (Nambisan 2010, 86). This strategy of settlers 'refamiliaris[ing]' themselves with the indigenous environment and practices is decolonial because it contests the 'foundation of Western epistemology and ontology' (Goldstein 1999, 97; Mignolo 2018, 136). Again, Stephen Pearson and Patrick Wolfe conceptualise this settler motif as self-indigenisation (2013, 165–166).

I depart from Pearson and Wolfe's conceptualisation of self-indigenisation and redefine self-indigenisation from a decolonial reinhabitory perspective because Pearson and Wolfe's theory of 'self-indigenization' illuminates the processes through which settler colonialists engage with and learn from indigenous environments and bears similarities to settler reinhabitation (Snyder 2013, 167–68). I draw from interpretations of how post-/decolonial approaches to environmental humanities deconstruct the Western binaries of human vs nature and resituate the more-than-human and multispecies world within lived-in indigenous lifeways (DeLoughrey and Handley 2011; Huggan 2009, 7-8). Consequently, it is essential to understand that the indigenous method of biodiverse farming has reintroduced the native ecology to Kodagu, transforming coffee plantations into forests. On a post-/decolonial understanding of indigenous Indian forests (which include British colonial environments such as Kodagu), humans are part of forests, forests are integral to nature, and 'nature' is 'the living force' that supports indigenous lifeways (Shiva 1988, xv). The decolonial process of identifying with nature on Kodagu's coffee plantations debunks the Western philosophy of nature as 'other'. Rather than objectifying nature, the Kodava community have decolonised themselves by being an integral part of nature, accessing and practising their traditional indigenous knowledge in daily lived-in reinhabitory lifeways. I call this process self-indigenisation. Self-indigenisation in Kodagu is thus a decolonial process for the Kodava community to reinhabit colonial and post-colonial Kodagu.

How does self-indigenisation oppose Western doctrines?

Within the framework of postcolonial ecocriticism, I see self-indigenisation's encouragement of decolonial thinking and practice as what Gurminder Bhambra calls 'a consequence of the depredations of colonialism' (2014, 120). The lived-in reinhabitory practices and experiences of Nambisan's personae in *The Scent of Pepper* reflect their resistance to forms of Western epistemology in their everyday lives. For example, Nanji's dislike of the 'disciplined' British plantations and the 'well-groomed' gardens in front of the British bungalows that housed 'unsmiling flowers in their geometric beds' saddened Nanji (Nambisan 2010, 82, 167). She preferred instead to simply 'spit out a seed and allow a tree to grow', liked the 'smell of the fungus and rotting leaves', and mixed the rotting leaves that fell from the jackfruit and *athi* trees with pigs' and chickens' dung to prepare organic manure for coffee, native crops, fruits, and paddy (64, 73, 137). In resisting the Western practices on Kodagu's indigenous landscape, Nanji fights cultural appropriation.[19] She identifies with the Kodava values, belief systems, geography, ecology, and culture that determine her bioregional identity. In this way, Nanji attempts to reconstruct her selfhood, with indigenous psychology informing and framing her bioregional identity and indigenous personality. David Ho defines indigenous psychology as the study of human behaviour and mental processes within a cultural context that relies on the concepts, methodologies, and other indigenous resources of a specific ethnic or cultural group (1998, 94). Here, Nanji's involvement with her fellow community and her land contributes to her selfhood, which decides her mental well-being. Samantha Walton provides a blended understanding of mental well-being, including the 'personal, social, spiritual, and political' (2021, 20). Nanji's selfhood determines her indigenous ways of interacting with and understanding nature, defining her personal, spiritual, social, and political connection to her land and people. She thus decolonises herself in the colonial landscape through self-indigenisation, with indigenous psychology countering the overall colonial lived-in experiences.

Nanji's practice of the indigenous method of cultivating non-native coffee instead of the British hierarchical practices of coffee cultivation demonstrates how the Kodava decolonisation process of self-indigenisation opposes Western epistemologies of plantation culture. Nambisan documents, for example, how Clara – the wife of Rupert, the British coffee planter – hired male labourers from the local Kodava community to work on her plantation but only instructed them and never attended to the coffee herself or worked with them on the plantation (Nambisan 2010, 90). To oppose this colonial practice, Nanji, a representation of the feminine Kodava coffee planters, showcased how the Kodava women disregarded class hierarchy, and all women (Nanji, her worker Boluka, and the Poleya and Yerava labourers), irrespective of caste, worked together in the fields to nurture, maintain, and structure the soil for a high yield of coffee, native fruits, crops, and spices such as pepper and cardamom.[20] The workers 'brought [Nanji] bamboo shoots for curry, tender mushrooms, fleshy crabs, moist green leaves of *kembu* [pearl millet] and elegant river fish', and Nanji in turn 'supplied buttermilk to the pregnant workers', 'jaggery coffee', and '*akki otti* with lime prickle' (23; my emphasis). The indigenous women practised indigenous farming techniques of mulching, squelching mud, and mixing indigenous ingredients collected from their immediate physical environment to nurture and maintain the topsoil. Together, these ecological and indigenous farming methods

'help maintain topsoil and species richness' and promote 'nature-friendly agriculture' where 'knowledge is shared' and the plants 'are viewed as kin rather than "property" providing sustainability' (Shiva 2015, 122). These indigenous Kodava grassroots practices reflect how bioregionalism's capacity for decolonial reinhabitation is possible through self-indigenisation. More importantly, the Kodava women believed that working together helped develop a strong bond of sisterhood among the community members in addition to their bond with their land: 'the workers called Nanji "*Baliyakka*", which means Big Sister', and Nanji 'gave them their midday meal' (Nambisan 2010, 23; my emphasis). 'In the busy months of Dalmiyar when coffee was picked', Nanji provided them with breakfast: akki otti with lime pickle every morning (23). Nanji cared for the workers like her sisters when they were sick. To fight colonial oppressions on women that prohibited them from working on colonial plantations and provided them with limited access to resources (Shiva 1988, 3), Nanji represented the strong-headed Kodava women who encouraged other women on their plantations. The workers were part of Nanji's family and celebrated the harvest festival of Puthari together (Nambisan 2010, 109). This strengthened their communal values. In return, when Nanji fell sick, the workers took care of her and bought her 'gooseberry wine' to help her heal quickly (27). When Nanji's sixth child, Subbu, was born crippled, the workers risked their lives to go deep into the forests to perform indigenous rituals to fetch tiger's milk and cook a solution made from tiger's milk and peacock's fat to cure Subbu's legs. The bond of sisterhood shows how togetherness and equality with humans and the more-than-human are fundamental to Kodava reinhabitation. More importantly, the bond reciprocates an act of self-indigenisation that provided them access to their land and resources and opposed remaining subjugated by the colonial powers and giving up to economic and political processes of colonial oppressions (Shiva 1988, 1–5). This highlights how self-indigenisation is a decolonial reinhabitory practice within the Kodagu community that prioritises their indigenous knowledge and bioregional identity.

The self-indigenisation of indigenous reinhabitory communities is a crucial decolonial strategy because the primary aim of self-indigenisation is to resist cultural appropriation and fight Western thought and practice. In the first quarter of the twentieth century, all medical practitioners in colonial Kodagu were British people practising Western medicine (Thurston 1913). The Kodava people were therefore reluctant to visit doctors and instead preferred to medicate their ailments with indigenous remedies suited for both humans and animals, such as the broth prepared from sheep's livers that were provided by Baliyanna, the Kodava veterinarian (Nambisan 2010, 23). The use of indigenous knowledge to cure diseases is a worldwide traditional practice in primordial communities that adds 'meaning and significance' to place and community (Anderson 2005, 140). Here, the Kodava 'landscape became synonymous with health' (Walton 2021, 98), providing sustenance and supporting the Kodava culture in all possible ways. *The Scent of Pepper* makes numerous references to Kodava indigenous medical knowledge, including 'potato poultice to draw out thorns' (Nambisan 2010, 24), 'coarsely-grounded fresh pepper to revive a newborn' (30–31), 'pepper used as a carminative, a digestant', and mixed with honey to soothe sore throats (35), an ointment made of tiger milk and peacock fat to cure crippled legs (38), coconut oil to heal burnt wounds (81), 'egg white mixed in marigold juice' to cure burns on the body (81), 'broth made from goat's head simmered in healing herbs' to cure pain (81), and jackfruit taken as a medicine to treat constipation (131). The Kodava

people worship the animals before harvesting the animal parts and produce for human healing, which I see as an act of respecting their more-than-human companions. The Kodava landscape thus becomes synonymous with providing sustenance and supporting the Kodava indigenous culture. The collaboration between indigenous knowledge, growing native plants such as pepper and jackfruit and healing herbs such as neem and tulsi on their plantations, and using native animal products such as honey, tiger milk, peacock fat, and goat's head from the forests to cure seasonal and severe diseases shows how indigenous ecologies have shaped the Kodava community's daily lived-in reinhabitory practices around their plantation forests. More importantly, the decolonial practices in reinhabiting Kodagu challenge the western concept of 'nature as an object of exploitation' (Shiva 1988, xv). Instead, nature in Kodagu becomes the major resource for daily survival. In this way, bioregional reinhabitation in Kodagu encourages decolonial practices and enables the community's long-term survival without causing any further damage to Kodagu's landscape.

Conclusion

Robert Thayer observes 'how humans have related to [plants] and sustainably extracted their living from them and how they might do so in the future' through identification with place-based practices, food, tradition, agriculture, and culture (2003, 35). In this essay, I have shown how the indigenous community in Kodagu revived and restored their native ecologies with their place-based ecological and cultural practices to sustainably reinhabit their bioregion. In the process, the Kodava community self-indigenises themselves to fight the Western doctrines of settler reinhabitation and reverse the colonial ecologies that injured their traditional 'natureculture' (Haraway 2004, 210). This practice of decolonising themselves is what I proposed as decolonial reinhabitation: the indigenous people self-indigenise themselves to break away from their colonial experiences to reinhabit their ancestral land.

As noted at the beginning of this essay, my purpose is not to critique settlers' reinhabitory perspectives, but rather to understand how reinhabitation becomes a decolonial practice when indigenous people reinhabit their ancestral land to revive and restore their injured landscapes and cultures. I agree with Erin James's opinion 'that bioregional literary criticism needs to develop sensitivities to reading aesthetics of place' beyond the 'Western sense of realism and rootedness' (2012, 273). Otherwise, discussions of reinhabitation unknowingly incorporate settler reinhabitation and cultural appropriation and domesticate decolonisation (Tuck and Yang 2012, 3). In this essay, I have explored bioregionalism's capacity for decolonisation (Berry 2006, 2015; Wiebe 2021), and investigated how decolonial reinhabitation prevents cultural appropriation and instead illuminates self-indigenisation, the lifeway practices prevalent among indigenous communities. In *Postcolonial Ecologies*, DeLoughrey and Handley note that stopping 'global environmental degradation [...] requires more than a "one-size-fits-all" approach to sustainability' (2011, 28–29). The decolonial reinhabitation introduced in analysing Nambisan's text adds to the existing discourses on bioregional reinhabitation, and although the primary purpose of postcolonial bioregionalism is to encourage dispossession in the non-Western world and introduce sustainability, decolonial reinhabitation

makes bioregionalism an appropriate post-/decolonial concept for studying indigenous environments of crisis in general.

Notes

1. 'Native' refers to plant and animal species that occur naturally in the region. I identify as native those species that are available in the region without direct or indirect human actions and that do not cause the environment any harm: see Morse, Swearingen, and Randall (2000, 12); Guiaşu (2016, 11).
2. 'Monoculture' means growing one crop variety on a vast acreage, which destroys diversity and alternatives and decentralises the control of production and consumption: see Shiva (2015); Wirzba and Kingsolver (2015). 'Continuous cultivation' refers to the year-round cultivation of multiple crops or a single crop to produce a high yield. It causes topsoil degradation and loss of soil moisture: see Berg and Dasmann (1978).
3. 'Indigenous' refers to the people and their culture, heritage, knowledge system, and lifeways that grew *in situ* before colonisation: see Shaw et al. (2006, 268).
4. I use 'landscape' to mean a cultural image of place, an individualist way of seeing and conjuring the natural scenery that separates the subject from the object by eliminating alternative modes of experiencing our relations with nature: see Cosgrove (1984, 13, 262); Stilgoe (2015, ix, 17–18, 31); Pavord (2016, 353). For a chronological timeline in Kodagu, I refer to archival data from the Madikeri Archives and ethnographic works of Abbay (1876), Chisholm (1922), Proctor (1986), Richter ([1870] 2010), and Thurston (1913).
5. I use 'land' to describe the ground within a particular place, the earth's solid surface distinguished by ownership, belongingness, and emotional attachment and understood by all human senses: see Syse (2008, 48).
6. 'Indigeneity' is a flexible construct based on the 'duration of inhabitation and lack of external influence': see Goldstein (1999, 161). Indigeneity includes indigenous epistemologies and worldviews and the lifeways of a community living-in-place before colonisation/ displacement.
7. 'Environment' means the more-than-human world and signifies 'the knowledge-based representation' of nature in which 'humans and their actions are embedded': see Castree (2005, 9); Sörlin and Wormbs (2018, 103); Warde, Sörlin, and Robin (2021).
8. Here, postcolonial refers to the particular epoch in Indian history (i.e. after 1947) and studying 'the relations between Western and non-western people': see Young (2003).
9. Collective Kodava indigenous reinhabitory practices include individual and communal reinhabitation. The textual analysis in the following sections show how both individual and communal reinhabitory practices reflect similar decolonial imperatives when put into practice. *The Scent of Pepper* fictionalises the Kodava communal ecological and cultural practices through the representations of Nanji, the dominant female personae in the novel, and her son, Subbu. Hence, in this essay, Nanji's individual practices should be read and understood as synonymous with collective Kodava reinhabitory practices.
10. Sarita Mandanna and C. P. Belliappa are the other two prominent Kodava authors who write historical fiction in English. Author and journalist P. T. Bopanna, a community elder, writes about Kodagu's social and political history. Nambisan, Mandanna, Bopanna, and Belliappa are the first generation of Kodava writers to document the oral history of the place.
11. 'Environed ecologies' are a framework in which humans are inseparable from their immediate physical environments and themselves function as environments: see Kohn (2013).
12. I differentiate between land, which has ownership and can be encapsulated with all senses, and landscape, which is a panoramic way of regarding nature through only the visual senses and cannot be owned: see Syse (2008, 48–49); Olwig (2008, 81–83). 'Bioregional identity' means the 'strong sense of place that develops with the lived-in-experiences' of 'reinhabiting the bioregion' (De 2022c, 42).

13. I borrow the term 'natureculture' from Donna Haraway (2004), who argues for the inseparability of nature and culture.
14. Robert Thayer literally and etymologically calls bioregions 'life-places' because bioregions are defined and identified by the 'unique human cultures that grow from the natural limits and potentials of the region' (Thayer 2003, xvi, 3). The Kodagu bioregion has evolved as a life-place because of the indigenous community's relationship to the land.
15. The terms 'tradition' and 'traditional' refer to the historical practice, a 'central process of Indigenous survival and renewal': see Clifford (2013, 28–29).
16. Ceylon, present-day Sri Lanka, had been the top coffee-growing country in the world. From 1872 onwards, the fungus *Hemileia vastatrix* spread rapidly across Ceylon's coffee plantations, causing the leaf rust disease. Eventually, coffee production in Ceylon ended in 1879. From 1874 onwards, the Europeans searched for an alternative place to establish coffee plantations. Around 1878, they found that Kodagu's dark-soiled mountainous region ideally resembled Ceylon's geography and climate: see Abbay (1876); Thurston (1913); Proctor (1986); McCook (2006); Wenzlhuemer (2008); Richter ([1870] 2010).
17. Settler motif refers to the 'invader mentality' of the colonisers that engage in displacing indigenous people and native ecology of the region: see Berg and Dasmann (1978); Day (2018). Centring settler motif within bioregional studies means acknowledging the existing structures of settler colonialism and its powerful effects on indigenous places, people, and ecology. The relevance of settler motif in Kodagu resulted in the loss of native ecology and establishment of colonial coffee plantations.
18. Here, I cite one of the anonymous peer-reviewers who (quite rightly) suggested what decolonisation is not: '[Decolonisation] is not a philanthropic process of "helping" the at-risk and alleviating suffering; it is not a generic term for the struggle against oppressive conditions and outcomes. Decolonisation is not a metonym for social justice'. Decolonial praxis is not to fight imperialism or politicise indigeneity but is for the whole world: see Anzaldúa (2015); Bhambra (2014); Mignolo and Walsh (2018).
19. In post-/decolonialism, decolonial reinhabitation opposes the cultural appropriation of dominated/colonised cultures and uses daily lived-in experiences to retain control of indigenous/local cultures against the dominant colonial cultures.
20. The Poleya and Yerava are different castes within the Kodava community.

Acknowledgments

This research is supported by the University of Groningen Open Access Publication funding and the Landhaus Fellowship, Rachel Carson Center, LMU, Munich. I am grateful to the Landhaus Fellows and the WIP sessions at RCC for their feedback on earlier versions of this essay. I thank my panellists and audience present at the "Defining the Human in Environmental Humanities" conference held in-person at Venice International University in 2022 for welcoming my developmental ideas of why reinhabitation in Kodagu is decolonial and asking intriguing questions. I particularly thank Iva Peša and Diego Molina for reading earlier drafts and providing valuable feedback. Finally, I thank the Editor-in-Chief and the peer reviewers of *Green Letters* specifically. Any errors of interpretation are my own.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by the the University of Groningen Open Access Publication funding and the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society [Landhaus Fellowship].

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