

PRESENTACIÓN

**ANTROPOLOGY, CULTURE
AND ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES**

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Environmental literature deals with the interactions between human populations and the physical environments that surround them. The relationship is one of mutual feedback. The physical environment has been a crucial factor in human evolution throughout the entire history of our species and, indeed, throughout the history of all life on our planet. Conversely, life itself has had a major impact on the earth, take for example the cyanobacteria that two billion years ago oxygenated the atmosphere and powerfully changed our planet. Human influence, initially small, has since the industrial revolution become a major geological force. Our mining activities alone have moved more sediment than all the world's rivers combined (Monastersky). *Homo sapiens* has warmed the planet, raised sea levels, eroded the ozone layer and acidified the oceans. Terms such as Deep Horizon, Fukushima, Chernobyl, mass extinctions of animal and plant species, shrinking water resources, and geoengineering have all taken on sinister overtones due to human activity. We've even a new term for it: the Anthropocene.

All these issues are, of course, both geographical and historical phenomena. They represent verifiable, reproducible, empirical facts. In view of the severity of the geographic and, indeed, geological changes that have already taken place, and those that will inevitably follow, one would expect a more robust public outcry. Contrary to this expectation, however, the voices of concern have been muted by the forces of denial arrayed against them. The discourse of denial is rooted in many and varied interests and, as is typical, scientific discourse alone is incapable of raising public consciousness to the level needed for action. The job of public persuasion, if it is to be done at all, falls to the discourses of the humanities. The communal mind is not moved by the ups and downs of data graphs, but rather by emotional ups and downs. From *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to *Silent Spring*, from the *Bible* to the *Koran* to the photos of a drowned Syrian child washed up on a Greek beach, we have seen that the human mind reacts not to logic but to emotion, not to reason but to rhetoric.

It is, therefore, the goal of this special edition of *Millars* to investigate some of the artistic and creative reactions, specifically those produced in the Hispanic world, to the very real environmental changes now occurring on our planet. These efforts share an interesting stance, in that environmental literature has one foot in the world of science, and the other in the world of literature. The empirical side originates amidst rational scientific data, while the literary twin engages our emotional depths. To further complicate matters, the critical discourse which assesses this confluence of science and literature is beholden to a theoretical model, postmodernism, which seeks to eliminate real world foundations from the persuasive function of literature. This is, obviously, a grave problem in an environmental literature which, by definition, seeks to examine human impact on the physical world. Hence the effort in this volume to examine both the facts and the fictions of environmental literature. To do so, we need begin with an appraisal of the limits of our current critical tools.

Ironically, the road to postmodernism began with Charles Darwin, who published *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, a work in which his central thesis was the impact of the physical environment on life on earth. Unfortunately, from a reading of *Origin* Darwin's half cousin Francis Galton (1822-1911) concluded that the state should intervene in human reproductive affairs, selectively mating those with the most desirable characteristics with each other, and culling the weak and nondesirable from the herd to improve the race. He called this program eugenics. The results of the implementation of his ideas were disastrous on a global level, especially in Germany, where Adolf Hitler became chancellor in 1933. That same year the German government announced that it would begin a massive program to sterilize eugenic "undesirables." Within a couple of years the enormity and brutality of the Nazi eugenics program became known in the United States, and was generally condemned by the American public. Eugenics would thereafter be associated with racist propaganda, reactionary pseudoscience, and Nazism.

With environmental explanations of human behavior effectively ruled off limits, a new explanation for all things human was needed. Into this breach stepped Franz Boas, who argued that culture is the ruling force in determining specific human behaviors. Psychology, at the time under the sway of the behaviorists such as John B. Watson (1878-1958) and Burrhus Frederic Skinner (1904-1990), reinforced this view. Boas's contemporary, Emile Durkheim, a founding father of the new science of sociology, made an even stronger statement, arguing all social phenomena could be explained by social facts alone: *Omnia cultura ex cultura*. Yet another contemporary, Sigmund Freud, argued that an unveiling of repressed life history events—a

“talking cure”—was the key to uncovering the causes of patient’s psychological problems. For the Freudians as well, environmental explanations of social ills were heresy.

The linguistic influence of Boasian social constructionism is epitomized in the work of a Boas’s student Edward Sapir (1884-1939). The German-born Sapir was an early leader in the field of structural linguistics, a forerunner of the later “linguistic turn” in modern literary theory. Sapir’s most recognizable contribution was the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which postulated the idea that language was prior to, and so determined, thinking. Sapir and his student, Benjamin Whorf, had investigated the Hopi language, and erroneously believed that it contained no vocabulary, syntax, or other grammatical form to describe time in the sense of past, present, and future. A strong version of this hypothesis, called linguistic determinism, holds that language determines thought, and that linguistic categories, such as time, limit and determine cognitive categories. Hence the Hopi were incapable of conceiving of time in the way English speakers do, as past, present, future, and so on.

On this view, then, language limits and controls thinking, which then controls and constrains social action. The current example of this vision is typically referred to as political correctness, a standpoint which argues that by controlling what people say their thought patterns can be controlled, and with thought under control action cannot but follow. As Friedrich Nietzsche famously observed, “We have to cease to think if we refuse to do it in the prison house of language.” Ludwig Wittgenstein concurred, stating “The limits of my language are the limits of my world.” The idea that language was the stuff of thought came to underlie literary and critical theory in the last third of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, and has yet to be invalidated in the field of literary studies.

This movement toward linguistic determinism in its modern form is best exemplified in the works of first structuralist, then deconstructionist, and finally postmodern theoreticians. Claude Levi-Strauss, in whose arms Boas died after suffering a stroke at the Columbia University Faculty Club on December 21 of 1942, was a pioneer in the field of structuralism. Levi-Strauss’s primary contribution was to apply the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure to anthropology. Essentially, his structuralist approach held that human relationships were coded like a linguistic system, and everyone acquired meaning through their relations to everyone else within the system. Thus human relations became a self-enclosed, textual, system. Later French thinkers such as Jacques Derrida would take this a step further, and insist (1976: 158) that “There is nothing outside the text,” “Text is self-referential,” and so “No escape from language is possible.” That is, they would

argue both language and culture are self-contained systems, either semiotic or ideological or both, constructed by their own internal principles. They do not refer to the world but rather construct it from their internal rules and relations. Society and culture become semiotic constructions free of real world "foundations," or objective truths.

Thus postmodern literary criticism has given rise to the science wars, the division between the two ways of knowing, science and literature. The German contribution to the state of affairs is illustrative. Not so very long ago, in Germany, a distinction was made between the sciences of mechanistic nature (*Naturwissenschaften*) and the sciences of the elusive human spirit/mind, or *Geist* (*Geisteswissenschaften*). This distinction is institutionalized in the work of such luminaries as Kant, Johan Gottfried von Herder, Wilhelm von Humboldt, and Wilhelm Dilthey. On this view nature is susceptible to reductive explanation—explaining complex physical phenomena in terms of simpler ones—while the human spirit can only be understood through sensitive, open communication with another human spirit. Hence, only trained humanists can understand human-level phenomena, which cannot be reduced to their constituent parts. Enlightenment versus Romanticism. This view was updated in Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (*Wahrheit und Methode*, [1960]). Gadamer argued truth cannot be adequately explained by scientific method, and that the true meaning of language transcends the limits of methodological interpretation. For Gadamer, the role of hermeneutics (the science of interpretation) in the human sciences is not the same as the role of methods of research in the natural sciences. Hermeneutics isn't simply a method of interpretation, but rather transcends the concept of method. Truth transcends the limits of methodological reasoning. Gadamer based all this on the transcendence of language, the postmodern approach par excellence.

A useful example of the transcendence of empirical truth by literary discourse is to be found best in testimonial literature. Quickly, let me cite two examples of testimonial literature which combine the truth and fiction, and yet which are accepted, defended, and rewarded as fact. The first is a classic, Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928). Mead, for example, claimed young women in Samoa could engage in premarital sex without incurring the approbation of the adults. Even in that most basic function, sexual activity, all was culturally determined, and so with proper enculturation the limits for improvement, women's liberation in this case, were endless. Derek Freeman and other anthropologists later proved her Boasian ideological blinders had kept her from seeing, and reporting, the truth, which was that female virginity was very carefully guarded by the adolescent female's adult relatives (Freeman 41; Alcock 132). Freeman was

subsequently attacked and vilified by Mead's many powerful defenders, though his findings were never repudiated.

A second example is *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (1983). It is the story of a Mayan woman (as told to Elizabeth Burgos, the actual author), who contested the social, political, and cultural mores of Guatemala in the late twentieth century. Rigoberta subsequently received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992, the Prince of Asturias Award in 1998, and was named a UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador. Her subsequent fame and name recognition allowed her to run for President of Guatemala in 2007 and 2011. Years after the publication of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, however, anthropologist David Stoll went to Guatemala to check the veracity of the details of Menchú's story. In his 1999 book *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*, he revealed that many of the supposed facts surrounding said story had been fabricated. For his efforts he was, as is typical of the treatment accorded bearers of unpleasant tidings, pilloried by the defenders of the testimonial approach.

Both vertients—truth and method—are extant in environmental literature, and both have their supporters. The empiricists fear the propensity for error contained in what they see as the quasi-religious appeal of testimonial-style persuasion, *a la* Luis Sepulveda for example, while those who feel fiction tells the truth by other, more profound means, point to the ineffectiveness of scientific reporting at touching hearts and minds. How the interplay between these two competing discourses is resolved will determine the final outcome of the programs advocated in the environmental movement. The resolution of this contest is a process that will determine the future history of environmental literature, and the future of our planet. The current debate is shaping the history, and geography, of our planet. One hundred years from now, people will look back at our current moment and ask why we did, or didn't do, certain things. We are living an historic moment, and how we cross our current environmental divide will reverberate through the ages. For those interested in history, geography, and art, there cannot be a more appealing moment.

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