

Editorial

Creative Writing and Art South Atlantic Ecocriticism¹

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“Subaltern environmentalisms” has emerged as a compelling new research area of the ecological humanities in the last decade. Connected to the rise of environmental justice studies, ecofeminism, post- and decolonialism, indigenous studies, degrowth discourse and anti-capitalist ecologies, it constitutes an attempt to reconfigure the maps of environmental discourse, re-locating their pivot from the “North(s)” to the “South(s)” of the world. Converging on the “abyssal divides” imposed by colonialism in its various historical and cultural forms, the projects within this growing paradigm promote the reintegration of non-dominant epistemologies and visions with awareness that, as Boaventura de Sousa Santos has written, “a massive epistemicide has been under way for the past five centuries, whereby an immense wealth of cognitive experiences has been wasted” (74). The Transatlantic regions of Latin America, the Iberian Peninsula, and Lusophone Africa belong to those “Souths,” and while they are certainly major sites of “epistemicide”, they are nevertheless still vibrant with cognitive wealth.

Skillfully edited by Luis I. Prádanos-García and Mark Anderson, our *Ecozon@* special focus issue on “South Atlantic Ecocriticism” is situated within this conceptual and political horizon. The territory explored in this issue is a very complex one: it is a territory of multiple colonizations, a territory in which different layers of culture coexist, but not without tensions: the culture of the natives, that of the colonizers, and the culture of the “West,” steeped in capitalist-consumerist and imperialist practices that often clash with traditional visions. To understand the South Atlantic area means therefore to disentangle a series of knots: the knot of biopolitics and political ecology; the knot of colonial and postcolonial history; and the knot of cultural anthropology and indigeneity. And this is the task of ecocritical analysis. As the guest editors explain in their Introduction, South Atlantic ecocriticism “engages cultural production from nations around the Atlantic Basin to study the ways in which environments and cultures are affected and transformed by the multidirectional circulation of animal and plant species, capital, commodities, development and land management practices, forms of activism and resistance, and people.”

¹ My heartfelt thanks to Juan Carlos Galeano, Mark Anderson, and María Isabel Pérez Ramos for their cooperative spirit and enriching conversations.

Privileged subjects of this ecocriticism, they clarify, are the “counter-hegemonic socioecological movements and theories” that “bring to the fore the interlocking structural causes of environmental destruction and social injustice.”

What is the role of the arts in this process of exposure? How can poetry, storytelling, and artistic performance contribute to shedding light on the knots that history and power politics have entangled in the bodies, minds, and elements of these “subaltern” environments over the last few centuries? The aim of our Creative Writing and Art Section is to address these very important questions.

The selection of contributors is, this time, particularly significant. We begin with two live performances and lyrics by Guatemala artist and poet Regina José Galindo (b. 1974), “Desierto” (Desert) and “Piedra” (Stone)—and it is from this latter performance that the striking cover of this issue is taken. The recipient of a number of extremely prestigious international art prizes—the Leone d’Oro for young artists at the 51st Venice Biennale (2005), the Dutch Prince Claus Award (2011) and the Grand Prix at the 29th Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts (2011), among many others—Galindo is acclaimed the world over for her capacity to “transform personal anger and injustice in powerful public acts demanding an answer that interrupt ignorance and complacency,” as the announcement of one of these awards reads. Commissioned and produced in 2015 by the Galería Gabriela Mistral in Santiago de Chile, “Desierto” is a performance in which the artist remains buried up to her head within a heap of desert sand. As Regina explains in her description, which I recommend reading, the performance “tells the forms of oppression, abuse, racism and colonialism” hidden behind the profitable industry of pine monoculture, which has severely affected the local ecosystem. Conceived in a Chilean context, this performance also echoes the same ecocidal practice taking place in Guatemala due to the palm oil industry—a disastrous monoculture which has contaminated watersheds and land, endangering the local biodiversity. The performance is eloquently complemented by a poem with the same title, where Galindo envisions a world in which humans—like her body buried in the sand—will be turned into desert. In “Piedra” the setting is a street in São Paulo, Brazil. As Regina explains, “my body remains immobile, covered with charcoal. Two volunteers and someone from the audience urinate on the stone-body.” The sense of this arresting and provocative performance is splendidly conveyed by her poem as the cipher of an existential horizon saturated by violence but still crisscrossed by the vibrancy of elemental powers: “I am a stone / I don’t feel the beatings / humiliation / ... / other bodies over mine / hate / I am a stone / in me / the history of the world” (trans. Mark Anderson). It is intriguing to think these postcolonial verses in combination with a passage from Calvino’s short monologue “Being Stone,” written in 1981 for an exhibit of sculptures by Alberto Magnelli, where the stone affirms: “our mineral nature [...] implies and includes the human [...]. Stone remains and the human goes; humans serve the stones’ design, and not stones the design of man” (420, my translation). In Galindo, stone’s impersonal agency is also a bearer of both the violence and vitality embedded in the geology of society.

The socio-political message of Galindo's works is complemented by the cosmological imagination of Rember Yahuarcani López (b. 1985) and his collection of paintings "Cosmovisiones Amazónicas / Amazonian Cosmovisions." Here, too, our readers will find an insightful description by art critic Gabriela Germana, which is warmly recommended to better understand the creative prospect of the "cosmovisions" of this painter born in the Peruvian Amazon. Acknowledged both locally and internationally, Yahuarcani López's work relates in very original ways to the cosmology of his native community of Huitoto (Ancón Colonia, Loreto). Through a lively palette of complementary colors and soft drops and strokes over a nocturne setting, "La primera chacra" (The First Little Farm) represents vegetal life in its archetypical appearance. According to the Amazonian epistemologies, Germano underlines, "plants have distinct spirits that are able to influence the material world and human bodies, and can communicate with people. This perspective on nature questions modern Western views on farming and the place of plants in society." The trees and plants of this painting are therefore something more than a naturalist representation, being in fact a material-spiritual power embedded in natural cycles. Here, as in the other two paintings "El río" (River) and "Al caer la noche" (Nightfall), playing with Amazonian myths and epistemologies, Yahuarcani adopts an abstract and non-narrative pictorial language to convey the lasting authority of Amazonian cosmologies.

In close dialogue with this visual artist is Colombian writer, translator, and filmmaker Juan Carlos Galeano's bilingual tale "Moniya amena: El origen del río Amazonas" (Moniya amena: The Origin of the Amazon River). Based on oral narratives about the tree of abundance which are found across the whole Amazonian basin, this story underlines the regenerative power of vital energy in its cycle of transformations through life, death, and re-birth. The landscape and natural elements in their relations to the human dimension are the privileged embodiments of these metamorphoses. As Joni Adamson argues, commenting on Galeano's "neo-Boasian" imagination, "the oral tales found in Galeano's poetry are rooted in Amazonian concepts of boundary differentiation that help us rethink anthropomorphism as a 'dis-anthropocentric strategy'" (256). In "Moniya amena," Galeano explains in his description: "The ecological concern of the inhabitants seems to coincide with the urgent outcry of our era toward the creation of a new environmental imagination that erases the dichotomies between human and non-human life." This reinforces the urgency of the environmental message of these stories and folktales, here aiming to denounce practices of land and water overexploitation. As Adamson again clarifies, "Galeano's *Folktales* clearly shows that the forest and its protector spirits [...] inhabit a decidedly social space [...]. They 'listen' and are aware of human hubris or arrogance, sometimes transforming themselves into a desirable shape and leading the misbehavers or those who overhunt or overfish away, never to be seen again" (261).

This rich section comes to a lyrical close with "Two Poems" by Lilianet Brintrup Hertling, and "Trash Returns to Being" by Mark Anderson. A Chilean poet

and travel writer, Brintrup Hertling gives us quasi-photographic visions of sensuous reconnection with the elements. In the first, “Nada me une a los árboles” (Nothing Unites Me with the Trees), the apparent distance of two natures as different as the human and the arboreal is bridged by the immediacy of a copresence suspended between silence and a deeper, more substantial communication: “Never a gesture of rejection never a bad shade / never a misunderstanding / not from their wood nor from their sap.” In the second, “Mar” (Sea), the ocean is both a metaphor and a very material reality—a materiality which progressively prevails as the poems develop. The sea, for Brintrup Hertling, is the future of human history as well the future of life forms, threatened and violated by the leftovers of Western capitalist activities and *Machtpolitik* (“Oils / Ships / Nuclear experiments / Deep excavations”). And yet, this ocean is also, like Galeano’s elemental spirits, a source of life and a willing a-personal subject “simply being there / giving / [...] rejecting our trash,” able to influence human existence (“diverting the course / of our hurried decisions”).

And the sea is also an actor in “Trash Returns to Being” by Mark Anderson, poet and ecocritical scholar from the United States, and co-editor of the themed section of this issue. Tacitly reminiscent of A. R. Ammons’s poem “Garbage” (especially in the last verses) and stylistically suspended between symbolism and expressionism, Anderson’s poem mimics the movement of residual objects scattered in the slow and forceful cadence of waves on a beach in Huanchaco, Peru. In these loose lines and words, graphically organized as to give the impression of the undertow, we sense the coming and going of fragments of trash (mostly plastic), suspended in water and given back to the life of the sea as a backlash of a synthetic violence that “returns into being.” With the regular slowness of its lyrical tempo and the stubborn presence of “shoes / bags / bandages / tires / bottle caps / syringes / cups / condoms / reconstitute from liquid q u i e s c e n c e / [...] into b u r n i s h e d / forms like stones,” Anderson’s poetic imaginary engages in implicit conversation with Jorge Luis Borges’s “Las cosas,” where we are reminded of how all the things we discard—“Files, sills, atlases, wine glasses, nails, / Which serve us, like unspeaking slaves”—will “long outlast our oblivion” and “never know that we are gone” (“Durarán más allá de nuestro olvido; / no sabrán nunca que nos hemos ido”; 277).² The effective final image (“o u r o w n b o n e s / lost outside our bodies / exteriorized / They are forsaken by currents / and colonized by enterprising souls / m i n u t e c r u s t a c e a n s / recyclers of us”) evokes the last passage of *Let mots and les choses*, where Foucault hypothesized that the human could be “erased like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea” (422).

Faced with an original and urgent topic like “South Atlantic Ecocriticism” and inspired by such an outstanding choice of artworks, this editorial has sought to prompt reflection about the power of creative cultural forms. As the diverse

² Translation slightly changed from the Penguin edition (in this case, by Stephen Kessler).

contributions in this issue's Creative Writing & Art Section show, cultural emergences are an integral part of the struggle against "invisibilization" (Öhman). They indeed convey "alternative understandings of the world (other than the hegemonic 'Western' values of commodification and constant economic growth) [which] are [...] necessary [...] to rethink our moral standpoint" (Pérez Ramos 48). Such creative work is a concrete demonstration of how art and literature, with their "immersive quality," enable readers to "shift from the here and now of their actual world" to the vantage point that Erin James has called "storyworld"—an intersubjective field resulting from "the world-creating power of narratives that catalyzes an imaginative relocation of readers to a new, often unfamiliar world and experience" (ix). Seen in this perspective, art and literature really are world-making practices: by revealing the "invisibilized" cosmovisions and epistemologies of the colonized, in fact, they enable a reintegration of what has been "marginalized, neglected, or repressed in dominant discourses" (Zapf 90). It is through their power to re-activate a society's "ecology of mind" that literature and art may underpin "conscious" dynamics in the evolution of cultural systems, helping establish different orders of priority and forging communication between "central" and "marginal" subjects.³

"The first condition for a postabyssal thinking is radical copresence," writes Santos (66). Returning voice and visibility to the dispossessed and delegitimized subjects of historically diverse colonialisms, the South Atlantic artists and poets included in this section convey radical and postabyssal energies to restore, at least tentatively, paths of copresence.

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³ This thesis, inspired by Hubert Zapf's cultural ecology, has been extensively elaborated and applied to postcolonial literature by Roman Bartosch in his important volume *Environmentality: Ecocriticism and the Event of Postcolonial Fiction*.

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