

Reflections on Literature and Environment: An Interview with Scott Slovic¹

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Scott Slovic is professor of literature and environment at the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR), where he also chairs the English Department's committee for the graduate program in literature and environment. From 1995 to 2002, he directed the University of Nevada's Center for Environmental Arts and Humanities before eventually helping to merge that center with the University's Center for Environmental Sciences and Engineering to create a new Academy for the Environment. A graduate of Stanford University and Brown University, he has been a Fulbright Scholar in Germany (1986-87), Japan (1993-94) and China (2006)—he has also served as a visiting professor at Rice University, the University of Queensland (Australia), National Taiwan Normal University, Central China Normal University, Tsinghua University (P.R. China), the Ecole Normale Supérieure (France), and Shandong University (P.R. China). Scott was the founding president of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) from 1992 to 1995, and since 1995 he has edited ASLE's journal, *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*.

The author of more than one hundred and fifty articles about American, German, Japanese, and Australian environmental literature, he has also written, edited or co-edited fifteen books, with six more currently in progress. His previously published books include *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing* (1992), *Getting Over the Color Green: Contemporary Environmental Literature of the Southwest* (2001), *The ISLE Reader: Ecocriticism, 1993-2003* (2003), *What's Nature Worth? Narrative Expressions of Environmental Values* (2004) and *Wild Nevada: Testimonies on Behalf of the Desert* (2005), to name a few. In 2008, he published *Going Away to Think: Engagement, Retreat, and Ecocritical Responsibility*. Much of Scott's research these days examines how writers approach the scientific, political, and psychological subtleties of global climate change.

Scott Slovic lives in Reno, Nevada, in a house he and his wife Susie remodelled to turn it into an energy-efficient home. This interview was conducted in Slovic's office, an adjacent room to where the *ISLE* journal is produced.²

¹ An abbreviated version of this interview was published in Spanish as part of the volume *Ecocríticas: Literatura y medio ambiente*. Eds. Carmen Flys-Junquera, José Manuel Marrero Henríquez y Julia Barella Vigil. Madrid: Iberoamericana/Vervuert, 2010.

² This interview was made possible thanks to the financial support of the *Plan de Iniciación a la Investigación, Desarrollo Tecnológico e Innovación de la Universidad de Extremadura, 2005*. I also

DIANA VILLANUEVA: *A few years ago the European Association for the Study of Literature, Culture and Environment (EASLCE) was founded. Nowadays, it seems that there is a common effort led by European ecocritics to promote the greening of the academia in the same way as it happened in the States in the 1990s with the creation of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE). What can you tell me about the origins of this organization and its impact both inside and outside of the United States?*

SCOTT SLOVIC: Essentially what you are asking about is the institutionalization of the field. The field of literature and environment is really much older than ASLE. Some people would say that it began in the middle of the nineteenth century, but I'd also like to point to a particular scholar named Perry Miller who taught at Harvard for three decades beginning in the 1930s. He was the first professor of American literature anywhere and his specialty was American literature and environment. He wrote the famous books *Errand into the Wilderness* and *Nature's Nation*. He was fascinated by the importance of nature in American culture and in the American imagination. So I'd like to say that from the very beginning, as soon as scholars began studying American culture and American literature, they had a strong focus on the environment, as in the work of Perry Miller. But in the 1980s we were existing during the time of the modern environmental movement which kind of came to fruition in the 1960s and '70s. It was precisely in the 1960s and '70s when the environmental movement became very active in the United States and many scholars were interested in finding a way to do their work in an environmentally conscious way. So there was an early movement of ecocriticism, as almost a gathering of likeminded scholars in the 1970s and then it kind of disappeared and evaporated a little bit in the 1980s. But at that time, in the 1980s, many younger scholars in America like Michael Branch, Cheryll Glotfelty and I were graduate students and many of us had grown up in families that were very aware of the environment and it just seemed natural to us, for various reasons, to begin focussing our work as literary scholars on the environment. We started to meet each other at conferences in the late '80s and early '90s and then, eventually, decided that there were many of us and we should try to be organized so that we could help each other.

D.V.: *What kind of an organization did you have in mind?*

S.S.: The organization ASLE, the field of literature and environment or ecocriticism, I think, developed in a very natural and organic way. In other words, we didn't simply create an organization because we wanted another typical academic organization. We created the organization in order to be supportive, to

want to acknowledge the encouragement offered by the research group GIECO (*Grupo de Investigación en Ecocrítica*) of the University of Alcalá.

provide assistance to people like us. In every possible, creative and clever way, we wanted to be helpful and we knew that some of us were more comfortable just going out on our own and doing our own kind of work, inventing something called ecocriticism. Other people prefer to have some models and want to read what other people are doing and read course syllabi and things like that before adventuring out on their own. So we wanted to create many different mechanisms that will help people like us. You know, *honesty* would attract other people, other scholars to the field, people who may not have been interested before might come to feel that ecocriticism was a legitimate and interesting enterprise. Besides, I think that a lot of us feel in our hearts that this is important work, it has the potential to reach many audiences. So there is a hope that there would be a kind of ripple effect not just within the academic community, but more broadly in contemporary societies around the world in order to help not just in the direction of greater environmental consciousness and more responsible personal behavior, and behavior on a societal level.

So ASLE began in the United States primarily organized by a group of younger scholars who started to meet each other at conferences and then it was at one particular meeting of the American Literature Association in San Diego, California, where a well-known scholar of American transcendentalism named David Robinson from Oregon State University approached me after a panel and said, “Why don’t you start an organization?” “Why don’t you actually create a formal group?” And it really happened. I think it was in the spring of 1992 when David Robinson asked me that question, almost like Emerson asking Thoreau in 1836, “Why don’t you do it?” “Why don’t you start keeping a journal?” So I contacted Cheryl and Cheryl was in touch with Mike Branch, and then at the October of 1992 meeting of the Western Literature Association—it happened to be here in Reno, in a casino downtown—we had an organizing group and fifty four people came, crowded into a small conference room, and it was a mixture of young scholars and old scholars, of people like university and independent writers—kind of a real unusual combination—and we all decided enthusiastically that we would try to start this group and we came up with a term that to us seemed very broad and flexible, *literature and environment*, inspired by the language that Patrick Murphy used for the journal *ISLE*. *ISLE* had not yet been published in 1992, it was still in process but we knew the name that Patrick was using and we liked the graph and the flexibility of that name.³ All of us were associated with literature. We

³ *ISLE* is a polysemic term. The word *isle* can be read as a synonym for “island” but it is also the acronym for the title of the journal *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*. Patrick D. Murphy explained to me in an email exchange that the creation of the journal *ISLE* came prior to the existence of ASLE which was still a matter of discussion. At that time the only existing publication on nature writing was the *American Nature Writing Newsletter* and Murphy thought it would be convenient to start a publication with a broader scope. With this in mind he tried to think of a title that would help to broaden the concept of ecocriticism as well as bear its way of analyzing literature and the disciplines from which it derived its theory and context. But at the same time he

were all writers or literary critics and we wanted a way to associate our work with many different types of environments: urban and indoor environments as well as rural environments and wild places. So instead of saying the study of literature and nature or literature and wilderness or something like that, more specific, we used the very broad term *literature and environment* and even leaving out the article *the*, literature and the environment, we intended the word *environment* to be very flexible. It could mean any type of environment.

D.V.: *Were there any suggestions about using the term culture?*

S.S.: To my recollection, there was no mention of that and it's interesting that you ask—in Europe the name of the group is the European Association for the Study of Literature, *Culture* and Environment. At that time we were not necessarily sensitive to the fact that literature might seem too narrow, and some people might be interested in a broader concept of culture. In fact, I think it felt bold and adventurous enough for us even to propose an organization emphasizing literature and connected with the environment, and many of us happened to be scholars of other fields than literature proper. So, for a lot of us, even literature is simply a kind of symbolic word that represents humanities studies more generally and the interest in language and aesthetics, and things like that. So I believe the actual scholarly and pedagogical focus of members of ASLE-US is much the same as the focus of the organization in Europe. It's just that the acronym A-S-L-E is a little bit easier to remember.⁴ [Laughter] But I do remember in 2002, when I was on sabbatical in Australia at the University of Queensland in Brisbane, we had a big conference on environment, culture and community and at that meeting there was an attempt to create a new organization, basically an ASLE branch. And it was a very argumentative and difficult meeting with lots of discussion of the name. Particularly, things started to fall apart over the question of culture versus literature and finally there was no momentum because there was too much debate over what the name would be and so, for about one year, nothing happened and then at a much smaller conference called The Watermark Nature Writers Muster that took place in October 2003, a group of writers and scholars created ASLE-Australia/New Zealand.

So, you know, sometimes if you have too broad a group of people you are trying to fit under one organization, it becomes very difficult and you come up with

needed a good acronym. *ISLE* became ASLE's official journal when Patrick D. Murphy had already published six of its issues. According to him—he agrees with Slovic on this—ASLE's name was inspired by the name of the journal that Murphy edited at the time and not the other way around. ASLE's foundational meeting hosted by the Western Literature Association addressed Murphy by phone to ask him about the convenience of using the name of the journal as model and that was how the name of the association was coined.

⁴ The acronym of the European association is EASLCE.

a long name listing many different topics of interest, so I think it's good to ask these questions: "What is the relationship between literature and culture?" "What is the relationship between literature and language?" Within ASLE-US there was even at one point a consideration of changing the name to the Association for the Study of *Language* and Environment. There were scholars interested in linguistics and in composition and writing who felt that language was broader and more flexible, but it was so broad that a lot of people didn't even know what that meant. "*Language and environment*, what does that mean?" It just seemed too floppy and too out of control and I think most people had a clearer sense of what you say when you say *literature* and, for better or worse, we have a sense of what the word *environment* means and it's good to debate with each other about these names. But ultimately a name is just a name, it provides an opportunity for us to work together, to have meetings, to have publications, to find out about each other's work and support each other's work. And personally, I favor any strategies we can invent that provide that kind of support and that provide a sort of visibility for the entire field in the larger field of literary studies, cultural studies, environmental studies within academia altogether.

D.V.: *So it's not like you felt somehow threatened by all these different labels and organizations.*

S.S.: No, no, I think it's helpful if we have similar sounding names so that we seem to be part of the same mentality, the same movement, so that when people hear about the organization in Europe they say, "Oh, perhaps you are related to what's happening in North America!"

D.V.: *Today there are ASLE affiliates in almost every continent except for Africa. At the same time it seems that you are the one travelling and spreading the word of ecocriticism, are you heading towards that continent as well, establishing connections there?*

S.S.: Well, I'm not doing this by myself. There are many important scholars from various countries in the world, not just from the United States, who have tried to take a leading role in writing important books and articles on the field. But I particularly find myself fascinated by the way people think in other parts of the world. When I travel to these other places it's in part to talk about what I'm doing and what colleagues are doing in the United States but also, every time I travel, I'm trying to learn new things about other cultural perspectives on the environment, about other bodies of literature. So I really don't think of this as an imperialistic process. I'm pretty self-conscious about that and careful about it and fairly conscientious about saying, "This is where I'm coming from. Here is the way I approach the field. What do you think about it? How might you approach it differently?"

But as for Africa, personally I am not really an authority on African literature or on the whole field of the literary studies within Africa. It seems to me that in some of the North African countries, like maybe Egypt, there's a strong literary tradition and a lot of writing that's recognized around the world as being particularly significant. And then in South Africa there're quite a few scholars interested in African literature and in some North American writers. So I do have contacts with several people in South Africa and hope at some point to have a chance to spend time with them.

Most recently I've been in Singapore, on my way to India last month, meeting with a few scholars, one from Singapore and one from Malaysia, to talk about the possibility of creating an ASLE for Southeast Asia. And I've just heard recently from a professor from the University of Malaya, in Kuala Lumpur, that she thinks that it might be easier for her to try to start a group specifically within Malaysia, rather than roping together people from several countries where you have more complications of working across languages and at greater distances. But one of the most important things is to have a basic critical mass, enough people to make an organization viable and energetic. You need a certain number of people—and I don't know what the magic number is—before it becomes helpful to have a formal organization. So in some countries, like in Korea, there's a very energetic group—I'm thinking of Southern Korea. In 2001 they started a branch of ASLE and they really seem to have a central group of twenty to thirty people and it hasn't changed much, but they have regular conferences, they have a very nice journal and ASLE simply provides a structure for them to have their meetings and get some kind of academic credit. Many of them are university teachers or students and if the organization is official, in some way or another, then it's easier for them to get money to do certain projects and to get a kind of professional credit that helps them to advance in their careers and that's a good thing too. We want ASLE not only to help scholars in a kind of deep emotional and intellectual level, but also there is a practical dimension to this and it's easier for us to get together and help each other if we're able to do the kind of projects that bring us professional recognition. So it's not only about professionalism or about pure ideas and social concerns—environmental concerns—it's about balancing them, helping people who work within the academy or as freelance, activists, writers, scholars, teachers, helping us all do the best work we can in a way that is nourishing to each of us and also enables us to try to do good work for society.

D.V.: *So would you say that in order to be considered an ecocritic one needs to combine scholarly work with activism?*

S.S.: For me it's a kind of spectrum. There is a whole range of approaches. Some people are really much more interested in activism than in literature and other art. Other people are intellectuals and they are interested in the ideas of environmental literature and environmental theory, and for them it's an academic

enterprise. Most of us live somewhere in between the two extremes and we try to find a way to put them together. We want to be good teachers and good scholars, but also live with a kind of social and environmental conscience so that we are helping our students or helping the readers of our work think more carefully about the implications of their own lives for culture and for environment. So, to me, it's just fine to have people approaching the field from a variety of perspectives and I've always edited the journal *ISLE* with a kind of broad-minded approach. I think people, especially in recent years, have taken a much more focused and limited point of view. For instance, in the last issue of *ISLE* we published one article by a scholar from Puerto Rico who argues that ecocriticism must focus on the moral urgency of certain kinds of environmental topics as raised in literature in order to inspire changes in behavior that will be binding over multiple generations (Gomides 2006). So this person is really arguing that the truest form of ecocriticism has a strong sense of moral or ethical urgency, and that if you are only studying the literature of nature because it seems beautiful or because it's somehow inspiring on a timeless emotional or philosophical level then what you are doing it's not exactly ecocriticism. I don't agree with the narrowness of that definition, but I appreciate the sense of urgency and activism, and I profoundly respect that point of view, and I think that in my own life I'm interested in everything and I want to support all varieties of this work. I also—when I was the founding president of ASLE-US—remember vividly a letter I received from a member of ASLE resigning from the organization because she had received a paper letter mailed to her by a crazy person named Rick Bass. Rick Bass is one of the most famous contemporary American nature writers and from the very beginning he's been on the advisory board of ASLE, and what he had done is take our paper directory, with scissors cut out every single name and address, put it on an envelop with tape and then mailed letters to every member. He mailed everyone a letter that he wrote asking them for help in protecting the wild part of the United States, North Western Montana, where he lives, called the Yaak Valley. And this one scholar was very offended that her name was being used for the purposes of environmental activism. That's to me the extreme example of someone who is interested in scholarship but doesn't want to be bothered by the practical worldly context. So, I wrote back to her and I sent her money back, allowed her to leave, but I also said, "This letter that you received comes from a very distinguished literary practitioner in the field of environmental writing and by receiving a letter from him you can learn some interesting things about his work: his attitude towards the environment, his attitude towards writing. You can compare the writing of his activist letter with literary essays and his stories. Basically, it's a personal contact with the actual struggle that this writer devotes much of his energy to." So I think you can learn interesting literary things even from the activist work of people in the field. In any case, we see all extremes and to me they all belong together in some kind of conversation.

D.V.: Hence, what's your response to Bloom's definition of the School of Resentment and the possibility of including ecocriticism within that group? Do you try to balance the importance you give to aesthetics, the formal quality of a literary text, together with its relevance to the environmental cause?

S.S.: It's a really interesting question. I've never heard anyone frame this question in the context of Bloom's categories.

D.V.: It was Niall Binns the one who suggested this.

S.S.: Well, I think with individual scholars sometimes the balance may be tipped toward ethics or toward aesthetics, but I'm interested in both in my own work. I find myself working with and teaching and writing about writers whose work I find to have prominent aesthetical qualities. The literature I study has beauty as far as I'm concerned. At the same time, I feel that artistic beauty takes on an additional power when it has a kind of relevance to questions that a society is asking itself. I find myself thinking of a small essay that the nature writer Barry Lopez wrote about an experimental visual artist from the state of Maine named Alan Magee. Lopez says that if a work is only aesthetically brilliant and it has no moral dimension, if it doesn't prop these moral questions in a way that the audience or that the reader takes to heart, then that work of art is like a letter which requires no response. It's not communication, in other words, it's just expression. It's quite a fascinating essay to me this little piece by Barry Lopez. In that he says that beautiful aesthetics, powerful aesthetic achievement, moral energy and moral urgency fit together perfectly. You don't need a school of resentment versus a school of beauty or something like that and to me, from the very beginning that I began working in this field, I felt strongly that much of this writing about the environment is both beautiful and kind of ethically powerful. So I really try hard in my own work to be sensitive to the aesthetic and the ethical dimensions of this writing.

D.V.: Anyway, you seem to favor nonfiction instead of fiction in your teaching. Why is it so? Is it that nonfiction has more potential as object of discussion in class?

S.S.: I have a very strong interest also in other genres, maybe less interest in drama, but still great interest in poetry and also significant interest in fiction. I think, just going back to my own roots as a scholar early on—I'm talking of the late 1970s, early 1980s—when I was a young student, nonfiction and especially biography and autobiography were really just emerging as legitimate areas of study within English departments in the United States, and so a lot of cutting edge work at that time was in the study of literary nonfiction. So I found myself at that point in my career becoming a kind of specialist. That doesn't mean I'm not interested in poetry and fiction, but I feel as if I have a particularly strong expertise in nonfiction and a lot of my early work was actually in the field of autobiography.

That may be one reason why much more recently I found myself using nonfiction narratives within my own scholarly work, telling stories in a nonfiction way and this is what a lot of us call *narrative scholarship*. All that goes back to my interest in the power of nonfiction: the way it enables a writer to speak directly to his or her audiences and say, “Here’s where I’m coming from in my life”, “This is what I’m thinking about”, “This is what I’m concerned about” and “Let me reach out to you in a kind of person to person way”. I find that quite moving and it seems to me that there’s something intrinsically different than the verbal acrobatics of a poem, and the use of other characters as mirrors and shields to protect the authorial self in fiction. I like the potential for sincerity, for a kind of direct person to person communication that seems particularly available in nonfiction. *That* seems to suit my personality, and so that may be one reason why I like it so much, but I would hesitate to say that I favor it because I think that other genres are very important and I’m also very sensitive to the kind of argument that Patrick Murphy made in his book *Farther Afield in the Study of Nature-Oriented Literature*, that in certain cultural traditions people are more inclined to use poetry or fictional stories, mythic stories, or other genre of fiction rather than the nonfiction natural history essay which has a very strong Anglo-European background. So if we are to take a broader view of what might be interesting environmental literature in cultures throughout the world, it’s definitively very important for us not simply to look for something like the European nature essay. If we do that, we’re excluding many different cultural perspectives, many different voices, and I certainly don’t want to do that.

D.V.: *Since you are responsible for the UNR graduate program in literature and environment which seems to put a strong emphasis on interdisciplinarity, to what extent do you think that combining two or more disciplines is important within the field of literature and environment and also within this particular program?*

S.S.: When I teach our required class in ecocriticism and theory, one of the major projects the students do is a kind of interdisciplinary project where they choose at least one other discipline to do some basic research in it; for example, forest biomanagement or ecopsychology, or something like that, a field that doesn’t seem to be traditional textual analysis for the study of literature or other artistic text. And what I ask them to do is explain the basic vocabulary of this other field and some of the methodologies in this other field and then explain how this neighbouring discipline might have some useful applications within the study of literature and environment. It seems to me that this is one way for all of us to come up with fresh and enlightening approaches to very familiar literature, instead of providing one more close reading, yet another close reading, of another famous essay, novel or poem. It seems to me, especially for students who are trying to find their own voice as scholars, that if they gravitate toward another discipline that they know something about or that they happen to be curious about, it

immediately becomes a way for them to do something original. Forest fire suppression, forest fire management, how many of us know something about that? Probably very little, but if you have a graduate student who works in the summers on a fire crew and knows about that kind of relationship, of understanding risk, certain types of danger—it's related to risk science, it's related to questions of resource management, it's related to certain theories about the human spirit versus wild nature—all this comes together in a very practical way in forest fire management and so the student begins to look at that and finds ways to use some of the methodologies of that very different field as a way of reading literature. That student immediately has become an expert in a completely different way of thinking about literature. It's potentially very fruitful and exciting for the student and for the rest of us who might learn something from what that student is doing. Actually, I happen to have a very long interest in cognitive psychology, so from an early stage in my career I started trying to apply certain ideas from contemporary experimental psychology. I'm not talking about Freud and Jung and that kind of what I call *clinical psychology*, I'm talking about contemporary experimental psychology.

There's someone named Robert B. Zajonc, a professor at Stanford, who works on attention and attitude in relation to behavior and various other scholars working on questions of trust and perception and I try to employ some theories from those branches of psychology to the study of literature. I just think there's potential for a kind of fertile interaction—what the nature poet Gary Paul Nabhan will call *cross-pollination*—as we bring ideas from other disciplines. If you look at any real problem in the world, any real situation that we need to be concerned about such as shifts in the climate, questions about water resources, questions of social oppression and justice and injustice, genocide—any of the big issues that people around the world are concerned with—none of them can really be approached by a single disciplinary point of view. In order to take control of these issues and make any progress, we need to combine thinkers from a variety of fields. So I believe in collaborations across disciplines. I believe that's one thing that ecocritics can do a better work with, if we find a way to speak to and work with our colleagues from other departments on our campuses or elsewhere. And also I think sometimes it's possible for us as individuals simply to read in these other fields and use ideas from the other fields in our own work. But, in the humanities, we tend to have a very individualistic model for scholarship where we try to be clever and creative on our own and we don't want to work with a whole team. In the sciences, they tend to work with sometimes even enormous teams, each person working on a different aspect of a big project, often because they are trying to solve real problems: "How do we sequence this gene?" "How do we make this bridge stand up?" and I think, especially in more applied forms of ecocriticism, we need to work with colleagues who have different ways of thinking and different backgrounds, different forms of expertise and if we work together we can make

much better progress than if we just try to do it all by ourselves. So I've worked with an anthropologist. I also do a lot of work with my father who happens to be a psychologist doing a lot of the basic research in decision making and risk perception.⁵ In fact one of the big book projects I'm working on right now is called *Numbers and Nerves: Information and Meaning in a World of Data* and my father and I are orchestrating this project and writing a lot of it, but we are also working with quite a few literary writers and with social scientists, asking them to do different pieces of this: a project that studies the way in which human beings struggle to articulate important ideas about the world by way of numbers. Because if you think about many of the important questions like climate, like extinction, like genocide, you seem to require numbers as a way of describing this phenomena and yet, if you are trying to communicate the importance of these things to a large audience, many people would just turn off. They wouldn't understand what you are talking about, wouldn't mean anything. So anyway, interdisciplinarity is very important. For decades now we've had this word, *interdisciplinarity*, and similar words like *multidisciplinary*, *crossdisciplinary*, *transdisciplinary*, but there are very few really good examples of effective transcendence of disciplinary boundaries, and I just think it's something that we in environmental studies and in ecocriticism particularly should pay attention to. I do try to install this idea in the students who work with me.

D.V.: Okay, that's your experience here, your teaching, what about when you go abroad and meet with scholars in other places? Have you ever been shocked by the way of approaching ecocriticism in other countries, by their methodology?

S.S.: As far as the possibility of interdisciplinary collaboration what I do find in many countries is that there's a kind of inherent conservatism within the academic structures, so that people are isolated within a college of law or a college of tourism or a college of engineering and there may not be quite as much fluid interaction between departments and different aspects of the university campus as we sometimes achieve—not always but sometimes—in American universities. But often, when you talk to individual scholars, especially in private, and you begin talking about the real topic they are working on, they quickly recognize the value of these creative approaches. I think it is pretty clear just about everywhere. I mean, the main differences that you tend to notice as you move from one culture to another, however, are that often there are indigenous traditions of thinking about nature, the relationship between humans and other organism or humans and place. For instance, in India, especially South Eastern India, a state called Tamil Nadu, where the Tamil language and culture predominates, there's a concept called *tinai*, and this is a kind of indigenous notion of ecology that has very practical

⁵ Paul Slovic's—Scott Slovic's father—most significant work in the field of risk perception is *The Perception of Risk*. London, UK: Earthscan, 2000.

aspects to it. So, often, when I travel in these other countries, what I seek to elicit, to draw out in conversations, is “How do people think here that may be different from the way people think elsewhere in the world?” I’m not after some kind of homogenous, blandly shared culture, but I think we can learn a lot from the unique perspectives in different parts of the world. We may well find a lot of common ground but we may find regional, cultural, religious particularities in different parts of the world and it’s really important for us to recognize those and there’s no simply one solution to every kind of cultural and environmental problem: solutions may be different depending on what part of the world you are working in.

D.V.: *So would you say that your interest in visiting all these places developed in a very natural way?*

S.S.: Well, it’s quite haphazard. It’s quite accidental. Basically, on a personal level, it’s very important for me to have friendships and collegial relationships with people in many parts of the world. I grew up in a family where we constantly had international visitors. As a boy, I lived with my family in Jerusalem, Israel, when my parents were on sabbatical there. So I never really had a sense of the work that I was doing as an isolated local phenomenon. I always was curious about the way people work, the way they live in other parts of the world, and the environment is one of these particularly vexing, complicated and fundamentally important phenomena that ties us all together regardless of where we come from, regardless of our social-economic status, our religion, our gender, our language. All of us live on the planet, we all need the planet and many of us, particularly in industrialised societies, have a pretty big footprint on the planet and what we do, the way we live, affects people elsewhere in the world. And I think we need to be talking to each other and I think I’ve tried to create for myself a kind of professional practice that enables me to learn what’s happening elsewhere in the world, to be as supportive as possible but not controlling. I really don’t feel like I’m controlling anything, if anything I may try to catalyze cause that’s the best word for what I do, right, I tend to maybe take a good of existing energy and provide some additional catalyst to give a little bit more structure to what is already happening elsewhere in the world, but then step back and say, “Do this however you like.” “Do whatever seems useful to you.” “Consult with me and with other people for advice but don’t imitate what I do as a scholar, don’t strictly imitate what ASLE-US does, make it your own.” So I guess I just have a lot of curiosity about what people are doing elsewhere in the world and a strong interest in being helpful. And I think that may also be something that underlies the larger field of ecocriticism. It’s not necessarily people wanting to be heroic, solve the great problems that we all face—environmental problems and social problems that we all face in the world today—but much of this work occurs in the spirit of helpfulness. Instead of people just wanting to go through the motions and do some kind of dry academic process of analysing problems that have interest only to a smaller group of similar specialists, many of

us have a strong desire to want to help, to want to make our students feel as if they understand what's going on in the world, as if they can thoughtfully read literature and appreciate other forms of art. We want our students, like ourselves, to feel engaged with the most pressing issues in the world these days. I often say for me literature and literary criticism are not really toys, are not just things to play with in order to prove my own cleverness or for my students to show how nimble their minds are. Actually, these are beautiful things that we can enjoy, but they have a real world context and I think it's in a sense our responsibility to appreciate that context, to articulate the meanings that we derived from literature in order to spur society toward a better appreciation of what our impact on the environment is. So, anyway, the question of responsibility is very important to me and it's one of the things I've been writing about in essay after essay over the past decade and I'm at the moment collecting many of these into a single volume that I hope to publish soon.⁶

D.V.: *Going back to the situation of environmental literature in the world, critics such as Benjamin McLean and Jorge Paredes have said that there are very few examples of real environmental or ecological literature in Spain (3). What would you advice to make this change?*

S.S.: I have so many ways of answering that question. First of all, I think you said *ecological literature*.

D.V.: *Well, that's the way they call it, literatura ecológica, that's the term they use.*

S.S.: I'm well aware of the debate over the phrase environmental literature versus the phrase *ecoliterature* or *ecological literature* in different parts of the world. To me the word ecology implies science, it sounds like a kind of natural science, but also implies the nonhuman. An ecosystem is a system in which many organisms interact with each other and I think environment may sound anthropocentric, like the humans are here and the environment is around them, enviroing, encircling the human. But environment to me also is extremely broad. *Environment* without the article *the* implies any kind of place, any physical situation or system of relationships that humans might experience. So I would say that if, in Spain, you have any literature that tries to describe the regional particularities of different parts of Spain, types of foods, different social customs unique to one part of Spain or another, different landscapes, the mountains or the coastline or the plains, maybe an agricultural region; if you have any literature that focuses on ideas related to place, then you have a tradition of environmental literature.

⁶ The work to which Scott Slovic is referring here is *Going Away to Think: Engagement, Retreat and Ecocritical Responsibility*. Reno: U Nevada P, 2008.

D.V.: *But we still don't really have nor use a label for this type of literature.*

S.S.: I know. But we, in America, we didn't have a label either until we invented it. So, I mean, fifty years ago if you asked any American writer or literary scholar, "Is there something call environmental literature in the United States?" that person would have said, "No, never heard of that, never heard of environmental literature". So even though this is so-called *nature's nation* according to Perry Miller, we didn't have the term *ecocriticism* or the term *environmental literature* or whatever we use until these were invented. So I think that in Spain writing about animals, writing about agriculture or food, writing about particular landscapes and the relationships between people and those landscapes, this is all that we call environmental literature in the United States.

D.V.: *So would you say that it is necessary to create the label in Spain? Would you say that it would have a positive effect on the creativity of future writers?*

S.S.: I think, to be practical about it, that it would be helpful, it wouldn't be merely a distraction. I think people who know that literature probably need to ask that kind of question. To me this is what literary scholars do, we make labels and basically we just put things into categories, very messy categories. Because you could have a literature or a piece of literature, a work of literature, which addresses some kind of powerful sociological question in Spain like the relationship between literature and science and if that particular text also clearly happens in a very specific landscape and the characters connect with that landscape in some sort of meaningful way, it can be literature of religion and science and literature of place as well. It can fit into multiple categories at the same time. So I think the great value of these terms is that they attract attention and people could say, "Oh, you know, when I think of it that way, there actually is a rich tradition of place-based writing"—that's a phrase that we sometimes use in ecocriticism, *place-based*. There's such a tradition in Spain, there's such a tradition in Japan, there's definitely such a tradition in Australia. If you look in most parts of the world, they may not be accustomed to the term *ecoliterature*, *environmental literature*, *nature writing*, *nature poetry*. These may seem like completely foreign and unnatural words to use, but the literature is there. Sometimes it exists in an oral form, sometimes it exists in music, sometimes it exists in the visual arts, kind of what Lawrence Buell calls "the environmental imagination": understanding through imagination our relationship to the physical world. It may in certain cultures be more prominent through music or painting or sculpture, or dance than in the form of literary texts. So as we look around the world is important to be sensitive to other media and other genres apart from a strictly western European style of printed literature. And even in the relationship between scholars in a place like Spain and here in the United States, we need to be sensitive to the different

cultural backgrounds from each of our societies and different types of artistic products from these cultures.

D.V.: *Would a revision of our canon, the Spanish literary canon, help to discover these pieces? As you may know ecoliterature or environmental literature and ecocriticism have entered the academia through the English departments and especially through people that were interested in American literature and due to the States' imperialistic image, they are often finding a negative response from people in other departments, so how can you do that? How can you create an interest in this field?*

D.S.: I've seen this happen in a lot of different countries. For me the most prominent example is that of Japan where the original ecocritics happened to be scholars of American and British literature and what they did, very systematically, carefully and delicately, was to begin inviting their colleagues from Japanese literature and Japanese philosophy to attend some of their meetings and give talks about nature in Japanese literature and thinking. So basically, in a pretty practical and conscious way, the Japanese ecocritical community developed an interest in the subject among their colleagues at their different universities—colleagues who specialized in Japanese subjects. And also many of the Americanists in Japan began switching directions a little bit and occasionally writing articles about Japanese culture which they would present at conferences in English because they happened to be skilled in the writing and speaking of English. They had an ability to translate Japanese ideas and texts for English speaking audiences. So I think scholars in Spain who specialize in American Studies could actually have an interesting opportunity to present some of the work from Spain, the literary and artistic tradition, for English speaking audiences and maybe even do comparative projects, comparing a Spanish writer with an American writer. I think that's a really rich way to go about it.

I don't know how to overcome the stigma of an American enthusiasm for certain subjects. America has become very well-known as a place that has a strong environmental movement. Ironically we have both a terrible imperialistic corporate culture that's had a devastating effect on our own environment and on environments around the world, but we have an equally energetic and brilliant history of thinking about and combating our industrial culture. So the famous California poet Robert Hass said that because America has such a terrible tradition of environmental problems we found it necessary to similarly export a way of thinking about these problems to the rest of the world.⁷ But most of us do not intend to be imperialistic. We are not trying to take our way of thinking and force it on anyone else. If anything, many of the environmental thinkers simply want to be

⁷ Robert Hass made this comment when he was interviewed on the *Jim Lehrer News Hour* on April 22, 1996.

available to give advice and energy to people elsewhere and to take energy from the environmental activism and thoughtfulness that we find elsewhere in the world. So I think if you speak to your Spanish colleagues and let them know that there is definitively not an imperialistic impulse here—basically we are just trying to be helpful and we want to learn from other cultures as well as share ideas from our own experience—eventually people would come to trust American ideas and American scholars a little bit more and see that we are helpful collaborators. There's no imperialistic or colonialist desire.

D.V.: *Do you foresee or envision a future where a world organization of writers, critics and artists engaged with the environment will emerge? How would you feel about writing workshops where writers from different cultures would meet and share their work on the environment?*

S.S.: Absolutely, these are great ideas. I think part of the evolution of the organization ASLE will lead to a kind of *meta-ASLE*. Right now, in a way—and I feel I have mixed feeling about this—ASLE-US in fact functions as a kind of meta-ASLE. We even have many international members, many people from other countries come to ASLE-US meetings, and we even have members of the executive council of ASLE-US right now from the UK and from Canada, and potentially from other countries as well. So ASLE-US was the first ASLE and I usually refer to the American ASLE with the “US” at the end to really specify it as a limited American organization, but many members of this group simply call it ASLE as if it was the only one and they don't recognize it as a branch akin to all the other branches in the world. But I can imagine a time when ASLE will not be the same thing as ASLE-US, when there will be a kind of *United Nations of ASLE*, preferably not even located in the United States, not located in New York City like the United Nations, but maybe, for example, in Cáceres there will be the international office to coordinate all of the ASLEs around the world and help us arrange interesting meetings and projects that we can do together. Some day maybe that will be the case, but I don't think there is a great hurry to reach that point.

As for creating opportunities for scholars from different countries to have workshops together and also writers, I think that's a really great idea and I know that such collaborations are already happening on a smaller scale. ASLE-US has its large meetings every two years, the biannual conference, but we also have smaller symposia on specific topics. The very first symposium in August of 1996 was a collaborative meeting of ASLE-Japan and ASLE-US with twenty five people from each country, including various writers like Mitsuko Ishii Moore, the Japanese version of Rachel Carson, and Linda Hogan, the Native American writer and many other writers like David Quammen, a very prominent nature writer. We were all together for a week and we took field trips together, we had many sessions, only plenary sessions, where each of us got to hear everyone else speak and I think

there was a lot of opportunity for informal conversation and sharing of ideas, so I would like to see more and more of these international gatherings.

Japan, ASLE-Japan has had a particular success in raising money so they've been able to organize some international meetings with people from Korea and Taiwan and the United States, and those are good models for opportunities to get people together from several different countries. There is a big meeting coming up, I believe in 2007, organized by ASLE-Korea and ASLE-Japan together and that's a fairly unusual and quite exciting event because there are historical tensions between Korea and Japan. Japan once occupied Korea and there are some strong and bad feelings, particularly from Korea towards Japan. So for a group of scholars and writers to get together for several days and have this joint conference shows that people within this community of scholars and writers are overcoming historical tensions between their countries and I think it's a great model for what might happen in other parts of the world with maybe collaborations between different Eastern European countries and the former Soviet Union or Russia. You know, people working together as academics and people interested in the environment and forgetting about past difficulties between their countries.

So personally, I often experience this kind of relationship with writers and other scholars. When I was in China last summer for six weeks often people would tell me, "There's a professor in this city or that city and you should go meet him or meet her." So I would contact them and then I would just rush over and sometimes only spent one day in a different part of the country, having a full day of conversations and sharing our work, and maybe I would meet some of the students also. But we were having these informal private workshops, learning from each other, and I realize it was an unusual privilege to be able to do that. But I think, even on a smaller scale, it's possible for any of us to do this. It's possible, for instance, for you to do a little bit of research and see if there are any scholars in Portugal who might be interested in the literature of place or literature of animals and then contact those scholars and say, "Hey, this is the work I'm doing in Spain; I wonder if we could have a meeting and talk to each other about the work that we're doing". So just so, in a completely private way, it's possible to begin this friendships and collaborations. It doesn't have to result in a publication together. It's just a way of sharing information and having friendships. So for me, I guess one of the most basic ideas is that it's exciting, it's nourishing and it's intellectually fruitful to have friends in different parts of the world and to learn from them.

One famous professor, years ago, when I asked him to be on a conference panel with me, he said, "Well, I never go to conferences because I find them a waste of time. I prefer to sit in my office and write my books." That's fine, this is a very productive, interesting person, but I think it's possible to do both. I think it's possible to write a lot and publish a lot and be nourished in your own life, energized and given new ideas by having friendships with people from other backgrounds and so. For people who think as I do it would be a good idea to try to

create opportunities to have one to one meetings, and this includes both creative writers and scholars, or to try to organize larger meetings, not necessarily huge conferences but even smaller symposia, a group of fifteen or twenty people just get together and give informal papers.

D.V.: *Now, what can you tell me of the Literature and Environment Program at UNR which just celebrated its tenth anniversary?*

S.S.: Well, one of our goals is to work with highly motivated and talented students and encourage them to pursue whatever direction is exciting to them and then move them forward into the next step of their career. It's a very practical program. We spend a lot of time devoted to professionalization because we want our students, the MA students, to go on into other graduate programs.

D.V.: *But was it like that from the very beginning?*

S.S.: Yes, from the very beginning we began thinking of what our students would do when they graduated and a big part of our program is to help them not just enjoy and benefit from their time here, but move forward successfully from this program into good jobs: teaching jobs, jobs as lawyers, jobs as editors, jobs as activists. But the academic profession especially in the humanities is very challenging. There aren't lots of jobs and it's extremely competitive to get those jobs, so we devote a lot of our time, faculty time, to helping our students prepare as well as possible for the job market. But it has never been our goal at UNR to have the only literature and environment program in the country or in the world. We like to have our program be as successful as possible. We want people to have a good impression of what we are doing here, but we would also like to see various strong programs at many other places within the United States and in other countries. We just believe this is an exciting and an important field and, if we do anything, we try to serve as a model. In fact, we would be very happy if some of our students would go to other places, get jobs and try to create similar programs to what they experienced here; and the visiting scholars who come to spend time at UNR, we would be very happy to see them try to develop a program like this, in certain ways, in their own academic home and we would do anything possible to help that happen.

D.V.: *Are you aware of any program similar to this outside of the United States?*

S.S.: There are very good programs at many other universities in the United States different than this, although they have a different culture. I don't think that in most of the cases they're quite as formal, you know, where there's a clear sense of our literature and environment community and specific requirements within the literature and environment program, academic requirements and things like that. I think we may have been a little more self-conscious about forging a very special

and recognizable program than has happened at other places, but that's not to say that there's a huge difference in quality between what we do and what other places do, it's just that we have to work within the cultural particulars of whatever institutions you belong to. But I do know of places in several other countries like Tamkang University in Taiwan. They have six ecocritics in the English Department, all Chinese scholars, and they organize regular international meetings every two years. That's a kind of the Taiwanese equivalent of the Literature and Environment Program or at the University of the Ryukyus in Okinawa, southern Japan, they have three ecocritics in their Faculty of Law and Letters, so they have a special concentration. At Kanazawa University, they have three scholars of the English Language and Literature Department who do ecocriticism so that they also have a special cluster. Basically you need at least a small group of colleagues who can work together, support each other, maybe attract some students who want to go there especially to study with them and then you've got the beginnings of a program. But in our case, for the past eleven years we've had four people centrally focussed on ecocriticism in the English Department with another eight or so colleagues in the English Department doing this in one way or another, so basically a dozen people in this department, and we made a very concerted effort to advertise this program and begin attracting the best possible students. Anyway, there's no single way to do it, there're various ways and one of our aims is to inspire other universities to create this kind of program.

Reno, Nevada, USA
October 2006

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