

Epistemic Location and Discussions of Place: Ecocritical Methods for a Pluriversal World

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MLA Convention, January 7, 2016

In a special 2014 issue of the *Latin American Research Review*, scholars Jeffrey W. Rubin (history), David Smilde (human relations), and Benjamin Junge (anthropology) develop the idea of “zones of crisis,” or “spaces of material deprivation, exclusion, violence, and environmental destruction” (8) in which “struggles for rights, recognition, and survival are enacted” (7). Zones of crisis appear frequently in environmental literature, and their representation figures in more general imaginaries of apocalypse and dystopia, as well as occasional representations of resilience and resurgence, that recur in contemporary written texts, films, and digital media from Latin America as well as other parts of the world. [slide of “environmental texts”] In this presentation, I discuss how the scholarly exploration of imaginaries of zones of crisis (which are often portrayed as the product of conflicting worldviews), as well as those of escape and resilience (many of which involve retreats from Western, capitalist worldviews), benefits from methodologies that incorporate an understanding of epistemic location into discussions of “place” and crisis. I am, here, both drawing attention to a phenomenon that is emerging in Latin American ecocriticism and also advocating for more of such ecocritical methodologies. In particular, I want to frame a series of questions about ways that the work of proponents of decolonizing knowledge, such as Linda Martín Alcoff, Enrique Dussel, and Walter Mignolo, can serve to advance environmentally-oriented

scholarship and teaching, not just with regard to works from Latin America, but also in the environmental humanities more broadly.

The institutional appearance of ecocriticism in the academies of the United States, Canada, and Europe has its origins in a particular historical, economic, and social context, with roots in a tradition (that of nature writing) that initially dedicated substantial energy to literature of place rather than imaginations of the global (Buell 1996; Glotfelty 1996; Heise 2008; French 2014). The consideration of human cultural expression—in written as well as oral and multi-modal texts—in relation to the material world of which those texts are a part, is a field of inquiry much more widespread globally, and one in which scholars informed by different methodologies have engaged without having labeled their work as ecocriticism. The imagination of the global, or at the very least, a critical consciousness of broader, border-crossing contests, tensions, and debates around places and the people who inhabit (and leave and traverse) them has been frequently present in scholarly production outside the Anglo-American and European traditions. In imaginations of the global by Latin Americanists, scholarly production has often questioned the illusion of Anglo-American and European traditions as a universal referent, and emphasized instead the embeddedness of those Western traditions in a global context that has shaped them at least since early modernity.

A particularly rich field of theoretical perspectives and models for practice for consideration of the global in the environmental humanities, are works of contemporary Latin American philosophers and theorists in cultural studies. “Certain questions at times give birth to new methods,” write Linda Martín Alcoff and Eva Feder Kittay (4), just

as Gisela Heffes notes that certain aesthetic practices can give rise to a new critical episteme (31). Questions about ways to maintain a continued human presence on this planet, with as much fairness, equity, and inclusion as possible, are pressing ones that merit approaches that are heterogeneous, inclusive, and in dialogue with one another. Methods for an ecocritical practice for a pluriversal world, I believe, draw from multiple disciplines and critical traditions, and in so doing, can facilitate a sort of “Google-Earth style reasoning that permits us to zoom in and zoom out on issues” (Bennett, et.al. 37). Ecocritical practices for a pluriversal world acknowledge and explore interconnections among imaginaries, worldviews, geopolitical configurations, and their underlying epistemologies. By exploring interconnections, they help to situate the environmental humanities in a trajectory parallel to that of “longer durée postcolonial and global studies,” as described by Sahar Amer and Laura Doyle (2015); contemporary religious research around pluralism, like that of Diana L. Eck (“Pluralism Project”); and feminist and de-colonial philosophy; with which fields of inquiry they may engage in fruitful dialogue in scholarship and on college campuses. And importantly, ecocritical practices for a pluriversal world also benefit from engagement with studies that take a deep, focused look at local phenomena, and which are complimentary to the study of forces and ideologies of global repercussions and resonance.

Like the heterogeneous methodologies and approaches of longer durée global studies, ecocritical approaches for a pluriversal world orient practitioners toward a consideration of processes, relationships, and interplays of discourse and lived experience, as well as the exploration of competing, overlapping, and intersecting epistemologies at work in cultural products that circulate in scholarly research,

classrooms, and society at large. Here follows a preliminary list of key questions such ecocritical approaches ask, or might ask, of texts, with a brief explanation of theories and scholarship that inform them.

Question 1: How does the “epistemic location” of the author, creator, or producer inform this text at every level from enunciation to dissemination and reception?

Ecocritical practices for a pluriversal world acknowledge that epistemic location matters, that knowledge is created *in situ* and informed by positionality. This line of thinking, of course, owes much to the work of feminist philosophers, as well as scholars in postcolonial studies. Feminist philosophers have for decades asserted that “real-world circumstances matter to explanations of how knowledge is acquired, what can be known, and who gets to know” (Koggel 2008: 177). The postcolonial and de-colonial epistemology of Enrique Dussel (1998), Aníbal Quijano (2000), Walter Mignolo (2011) and others, goes even further. Those thinkers point out that Western epistemology is one way of knowing, and that there are two main roots of Western epistemology: secular and religious. Western epistemology, both the secular and the religious, is inseparable from the coloniality of power, a concept postulated by Quijano and which Alcoff summarizes as “the organization of power and status through social identities constructed within colonial relations of production” (Alcoff 2013: 58). Understanding and tracing the permutations over time of the colonial roots of the organization of power and status –as well as the knowledge they generated and excluded– deepens comprehension of textual representations of zones of crisis, as well as the dynamics within those zones of crisis as they unfold in our own lived reality (French 54).

Ecocritical practice for a pluriversal world acknowledges the “global networks within which European modernity itself became possible” (Alcoff 2007: 84) and that our own university contexts are rooted in this coloniality of power. For example, Alcoff has noted as recently as 2013 that there are no required courses in post-colonial philosophy in any department in the Americas (2013: 58). Mignolo and others have also frequently reminded readers that epistemology informs the structure and culture of institutions for knowledge production and the canonization of knowledge, in the past (such as during the creation of the modern university during the Enlightenment) and in the present (Alcoff 2007: 81-83). And finally, perhaps obviously, it is important to note that the epistemology of coloniality matters for texts from hegemonic, colonizing cultures, those from peoples and places colonized, and those articulated by the numerous individuals throughout history who have moved among territories, cultures, and languages. An important contribution to ecocritical practice is the reminder from Latin American cultural theorists that there is no “detached and neutral point of observation” (Mignolo 2009: 2), what Colombian philosopher Santiago Castro-Gómez calls the “hubris of the zero point (cited in Mignolo 2009: 2).¹

Question 2: Given that setting aside the hubris of the zero point is difficult, how might we in ecocriticism shape, use, and teach a critical language, in the form of rhetoric and terminology that acknowledges the contingency of terms and concepts, as well as the dynamic (and contested) nature of the shared understanding of those terms? Here I am asking about critical language that demonstrates what those in international

¹ Neither Mignolo nor I are questioning the veracity of scientific facts like the carbon cycle, for example, but rather that scientific research is imagined, defined, and conducted within human systems.

education, like Darla K. Deardorff (2009), might call intercultural competency, and I am thinking in particular of the ways we engage with discussions of spatial concepts like *wilderness* and *nature* in English and terms for temporality like “modernity” and “post-modernity.” Those latter terms regarding temporality are challenged by Enrique Dussel, for example, who advocates for the use of the term transmodernity to disrupt the imagination of linearity and progress implicit in the use of terms like “modernity” and “postmodernity.” Transmodernity as term intends to displace the notion of temporalization with one of specialization in time and space; in a “transmodern world,” there are not spaces that exist outside of a temporal progression, outside of modernity, and the notion that modernity happens elsewhere is no longer a tenable one (Alcoff 2007: 84). This question about the importance of language that is interculturally informed is particularly relevant in comparative studies, as well as those about digital primary texts from zones of crisis, like blogs, websites, citizen journalism, and videos which are intended to disseminate struggles in a particular locale out to larger audiences, and which often are reinterpreted and transmitted multiple times by multiple sources, each of which may “translate” the events for different audiences. [slide of side-by-side blogs]

Question 3: How might our scholarship, our public dialogue, and our teaching acknowledge that digging deeper matters and also that connecting across disciplines, traditions, and locations matters? Management of the tension between these two tendencies can yield thoughtful insights, and perhaps most importantly, foster the radical humility that religious studies scholar Victor H. Kazanjian has called for among academics (2013). If each text is a cultural product that exists in a world both social and

material, it follows for scholarly readers of texts to interrogate (a) the processes by which the text was created and disseminated, (b) the positionality of creators vis-à-vis the culture(s) in which the text is rooted and those others with which it dialogues by its reception, and (c) the underlying epistemological systems, including those in conflict/tension in the text, as well as in its audience. Robust exploration of these questions in a corpus of texts is most likely accomplished through more collaboration, dialogue, and exchange.

Question 4 follows logically from Question 3: How might ecocriticism, like ecological thinking more generally, continue to model new modes of inquiry in the humanities, and especially those that are heterogeneous, collaborative, and inquisitive, that ask more questions, of more people, places, experiences, ideas, and texts, than they answer? Emerging methodologies and practices from the field of Latin American ecocritical studies, for instance, interrogate “the subordination of non-European modes of knowing, conceptualization, and representation” (Alcoff 2007: 84), not just broadly but specifically with regard to the non-human natural world and to its depiction in cultural texts from particular periods, like the colonial one (French 2014). Ecocriticism for a pluriversal world can also model self-reflection, as panel organizers Jennifer French and Gisela Heffes encourage at their upcoming LASA panel on methodological challenges and interdisciplinarity in ecocriticism.

Finally (by way of acknowledgement of my own epistemic location and positionality), for me now two decades deep into an academic career, it is important that collaborative, inquisitive ecocritical practice inform not just my scholarship but also my teaching, learning, and reflection with diverse groups of students and colleagues about

the ways we live, learn, and interact in the world. If “in broader institutional and national discussions about environmental literacy, it is critical to underscore the need for students to understand environmental topics as areas of knowledge, belief, and experience mediated by diverse cultural perspectives” (Barbas Rhoden, Brunow, and Newman 6), how might the work I do, the work you do, as a scholar and a citizen, contribute to addressing that challenge at its deepest and also its most practical and quotidian levels? [slide: digital media/environment/Latin America]

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