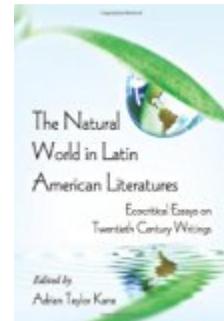


Adrian Taylor Kane, ed. *The Natural World in Latin American Literatures: Ecocritical Essays on Twentieth-Century Writings*. Jefferson: McFarland & Co., Publishers, 2010. 252 pp. \$45.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7864-4287-4.

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Sampling Ecological Approaches to Latin American Literature

One of three main ways of doing environmental history, according to how Donald Worster maps the field, is to focus on the “purely mental or intellectual” encounter of human societies with nature. This is a process “in which perceptions, ethics, laws, myths, and other structures of meaning become part of an individual’s or group’s dialogue with nature.”[1] Of course, if the attempt is to pursue conclusions in the treacherous cognitive and semiotic realm, then gathering evidence to support such conclusions poses a serious challenge. Literature, though, is one potential source—with limits and shortcomings—that environmental historians can turn to among other data for clues about a specific cultural moment’s discourse on nature. In other words, fiction and poetry qualify as examples of what William Cronon says are the “less orthodox sorts of evidence that historians borrow from other disciplines” in order to do environmental history.[2]

For environmental historians interested in using literature in their work on all or parts of Latin America, a new collection of literary criticism about the past century of Latin American fiction and poetry would likely prove valuable. *The Natural World in Latin American Literatures: Ecocritical Essays on Twentieth Century Writings*, edited by Adrian Taylor Kane, claims to be the first of its kind to gather examples of criticism from an ecological perspective on literature throughout Latin America.[3] Kane explains in his prologue that only recently have scholars of Latin American literature begun using ecolog-

ical theories and perspectives. Therefore the ecocriticism subfield is less developed among Latin Americanists than it is among literary scholars of U.S. and European writers. In the opening essay Jonathan Tittler presents an overview of ecocriticism—which he defines in brief form by quoting Cheryl Glotfelty as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (p. 12)—that includes its genesis, its main tenets, and examples of how it can be applied to a sample of writings. The remainder of the collection is comprised of essays that may dwell on a specific work, or offer a close comparison of two or three works.

Some essays are helpful to non-literary specialists by highlighting newer, lesser-known writers such as the Argentine Héctor Tizón and avant-garde authors of the past such as Macedonio Fernández, also of Argentina. At other times the analysis contends with writers and works with which most readers will be familiar. The *maestro* Gabriel García Márquez is one famous writer who earns discussion in several places, as does the classic works *Don Segundo Sombra* (1926) by Ricardo Güiraldes, *Doña Barbara* (1929) by Rómulo Gallegos, and books by the well-known Peruvian Mario Vargas Llosa.

The eleven essays are grouped into three sections. The first section, entitled “Nature, Modernity and Technology in Twentieth-Century Latin American Fiction,” is deliberately historical. It “is based on the premise that an [sic] historical approach to literature ... offers a more

profound understanding of the complex nature/culture relationship that inevitably shifts with historical circumstances” (pp. 2-3). For example, the historical circumstances in the second essay, entitled “Nature and the Discourse of Modernity in Spanish American Avant-Garde Fiction” and written by Kane, is the modernist trend of the 1920s and 1930s. Kane sees the modernizing mood of leaders and the policy of industrializing reflected in avant-garde authors such as Macedonia Fernández of Argentina or Salvador Novo of Mexico. Kane argues that the lack of nature or the abstracted, even surreal, manner in which it is portrayed in the avant-garde fiction reflects this urban focus and disregard for the natural environment that was prevalent in Latin American thinking and policies in the interwar period.

The third essay, “Nature in the Twentieth-Century Latin American Novel and in *Cien años de soledad*,” is by Raymond L. Williams, who is probably the most accomplished expert in the collection on Latin American literature and especially on García Márquez. His essay is one of several that are not as applicable to a historical understanding of nature in Latin America as historians may hope. Instead, scholars use their questions about the role that nature plays in a piece of writing to arrive at new and important conclusions about the piece of writing, the writer, or comparative connections with other literature. Williams ultimately argues for a new way of appreciating the complexity of the García Márquez novel by identifying “a multiplicity of filters” that García Márquez used in presenting his versions of nature in his fictional settings. The author relied on oral storytelling traditions in his descriptions of nature, or images from a European artist of Latin American scenes who had never set foot in Latin America. Ultimately, Williams concludes that the novel “is less about nature and technology than about oral and writing culture’s images of nature and technology” (p. 86). The fourth essay, by Gustavo Llarull, also analyzes *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1970) and also finds a complex, ironic portrayal of nature and technology within it.

The second section uses the provocative theme of utopias to attempt to organize the next three essays. However, the notion of utopia fully formed is only central to the second essay, which is Marisa Pereyra’s exploration of the theories of ecofeminism and utopian literature through an analysis of the Nicaraguan writer Gioconda Belli and her novel *Waslala: Memorial del futuro* (1996). The first article, by Lizbeth Paravisini-Gebert, is a fascinating tour of environmentalist causes in some parts of the Caribbean in recent decades and the ways in which artists, including writers, contribute. The article does

not hang together well and does not engage in the close literary analysis of other essays, but the environmental causes that Paravisini-Gevert chose to explore are fascinating and, except for the Vieques Island case in Puerto Rico, little known outside their area. Another interesting conclusion from Paravisini’s survey of what her essay title calls “Caribbean Utopias and Dystopias” is that the activists lose their causes, which seems to be at odds with Tittler’s optimistic claim that writers and critics can change public attitudes that in turn reverse present-day environmental threats (p. 20).

The final essay in the utopia section, by Martín Camps, traces the changing role that the pampas have played in Argentine literature over the course of the twentieth century. The fertile grasslands were cast in the 1920s in a starring, romantic role in well-studied regional novels such as *Don Segundo Sombra*. Buenos Aires then dominated as a setting for later writers, but recently writers such as Héctor Tizón and Mempo Giardinelli have paid renewed attention to the pampas, and Patagonia as well. While nature is no longer romanticized, this shift reflects renewed concern for the environmental damage in Argentina wrought by globalization, according to Camps.

The third section is organized around the fact that the three essays in it share some attention paid to oppressed groups in society. The essay by Dora Ramírez-Dhoore does historians the service of bringing attention to the English-language fiction of Chicana writers Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Helen María Viramontes. Their works bring to life the plight of Mexican workers in U.S.-owned fields and factories, and also shed light on the environmental degradation of agricultural and industrial areas where this work is done. However, the essay by Ramírez-Dhoore may be the least valuable in the collection due to a lack of rigor in organizing, clarifying, and even proof-reading her work.

The next essay in this section, by Traci Roberts-Camps, examines a single writer, Rosario Castellanos, and the role of nature in her novel *Oficio de tinieblas* (1962), set in the author’s home region of Chiapas, Mexico. Because the mountainous region of Chiapas is also home to extensive but exploited communities of Maya, this story that Castellanos set in the 1930s features protagonists who are Tzotzil Maya, including a shaman. Roberts-Camps shows how Castellanos brings to light both the oppression suffered by these Indians and their distinctive understanding of nature as able to communicate to humans.

The final essay, entitled “National Nature and Ecologies of Abjection in Brazilian Literature at the Turn of the Century,” is the only one in the collection that deals with Brazil. Mark D. Anderson’s study argues that depictions of Brazil’s natural environment figured crucially in an ongoing effort by intellectuals to define first the colony and then the nation. This essay comes the closest to the work of historians themselves, because its sources are nonfiction primary documents for the most part and Anderson is attentive to change over time and to the wider contexts of particular works. Anderson devotes the most attention to the influential turn-of-the-century writer Euclides da Cunha. Anderson focuses on the ecological assumptions at work in Cunha’s attempts to posit an authentic Brazilian nationalism through descriptions of the both the arid northeastern interior and the Amazon. In his effort to define Brazilian nationalism during a vulnerable political phase for the country, Cunha’s basic assumption—shared by most other Brazilian intellectuals in its history—was that regions of the interior and its inhabitants are deviations from the normative environment and society found on Brazil’s coast. Anderson fails to account for other historical studies of the arid northeast and the Atlantic forest that would be relevant to his essay, but he does succeed in demonstrating the strong potential for an ecological focus in exploring Cunha and his nationalist genre.

Though this collection would not be a productive text to assign to students in even a graduate-level history course, it is a worthwhile tour for historians who see a place for literary evidence in their work on the environmental history of Latin America. While it would be forgivable for non-specialists in literature to browse some parts of the collection, the tour will at its conclusion succeed in introducing environmental historians to useful theoretical approaches and also to new works of literature with potential as sources for exploring what Worster called “the structures of meaning” that shape a society’s dialogue with nature.

Notes

[1]. Donald Worster, *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 49.

[2]. William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1983), 7.

[3]. Despite the claim of uniqueness, another collection published a year before, in 2009, appears to do something similar. See Beatriz Rivera-Barnes and Jerry Hoegel, eds., *Reading And Writing the Latin American Landscape* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

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