

## Opening Black Boxes in Iberian Debates on Life

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Ahead of the November United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris, the summer months of 2015 have seen several important statements from faith communities on the issue of global warming. Among them, Pope Francis has published the encyclical letter *Laudato Si*. The Archbishops of Canterbury and York, along with other faith leaders in the UK, published *The Lambeth Declaration on Climate Change*. A group of Islamic scholars published *The Islamic Declaration on Climate Change* in late August. Prior to these, May 2015 saw the publication of *The Time to Act is Now: A Buddhist Declaration on Climate Change* and *To the Jewish People, to all Communities of Spirit, and to the World: A Rabbinic Letter on the Climate Crisis*. These texts not only share a confluence of scientific, humanist, and theological thought, but also foment dialogue between communities of faith, existing environmental movements, national governments, and international institutions. As indicated in the Buddhist declaration's title, these documents issue the imperative to act on behalf of the planet and poor communities. Moreover, *Laudato Si* is concerned with the grip of global capitalism and its deadly premise of economic growth within the limits of a finite world. Human activity should change course and care for "our house," as the subtitle of the encyclical suggests. Following Bataille, one can read these documents as imperatives to "leave ourselves" (11). They are examples of moral and ethical dramatizations of opaque scientific data and ecological violence frequently rendered invisible or semi-visible in our daily experience.

On the eve of the encyclical's anticipated publication, Rubén Martínez reflected that forging alliances across geographical, political, socio-economic, and cultural lines is one of the most difficult challenges facing humanity today. Given this Tower of Babel, the exploitation of (non)humans and the overextraction of resources, how can we learn to think collectively to combat economic "self-interest" and propose different solutions? While the magnitude of these religious texts will continue to have reverberations on a

global scale, it is also important to develop critical projects that register and contemplate cultural responses on the levels of the national and regional which often contain discrete ideas, practices, and materials frequently left out of global debates on major issues, such as climate change, water scarcity, food shortages, the loss of biodiversity, the treatment of animals, and, more broadly, notions of life itself.

The *Ethics of Life: Contemporary Iberian Debates* volume aims for such a critical re-orientation within the field of Iberian Studies, offering multidisciplinary contributions that investigate notions, practices and forms of life that have been sidelined through the narrow lens of anthropocentric debates and conceptions. How might a more inclusive ethics of life contribute to existing debates on critical issues such as identity, violence or memory? What is the forthcoming critical task created by these revisionary approaches to human and nonhuman life? And finally, what forum does such an ethics seek within the purview of pedagogy?

One place to begin considering these questions is the introduction to Bruno Latour's *Science in Action*, in which he considers the cybernetic notion of the black box: a mechanism whose interior is assumed to be working and, therefore, "taken for granted" as Graham Harman puts it in his treatment of Latour (33). As investigators, we assume a certain function of the black box and merely plug in components to create an effective network. Latour's study investigates how black box objects are composed—that is to say, how "colder," established scientific theories originated from "warmer" unstable ideas that have yet to be settled as established facts (21). Latour draws our attention to how all facts, no matter how satisfactory, might be questioned and re-examined until once again accepted. Opening black boxes such as "life," "environment," and "nature" creates a new set of working questions as we read through a variety of texts and consider a variety of ideas, projects and creatures.

One major black box examined in the present volume is the human. The non-human turn has recently suggested that research broaden the parameters of "life" within and without the human. These prepositions "within" and "without" are significant—for they do not entail a negation of the human, but rather denote a process to re-consider human life as an *entanglement* with what it is not, that is to say, with nonidentity. Networks of social relation as well as rich contours of linguistic and visual variation are invariably connected with nonhuman and nonliving beings. As Ortega famously observed: "I am I and my circumstance and, if I do not save it, I do not save myself" (322). There is an ecological bent to this sentence. Self-preservation is tied to environmental preservation. What is, however, meant by circumstance? A purely social surrounding? A human community predicated on normative forms of behavior? This collection of work answers that there is surely more to consider. In this sense, to speak of culture is to

contemplate the impact of human expression and thought on real, living, inanimate, or dead beings that populate this planet. Conversely, it stands to reason that non-human beings can no longer be left sidelined in mute observation of human expression.

Several contributors push Ortega's notion of circumstance to consider how individual human lives have transformed with respect to new technologies and contemporary debates about the beginning and ending of human life. Surayanarayanan and Beilin investigate growing industry of biotechnology in Spain and question claims that GMOs, for example, are a sign that Spain has departed from its historically reticent relationship with science and embraced modern advancements. Yet embracing these risky technologies may ironically be a sign that Spain has become subordinate to new authorities: multinational corporations and nation-states subservient to their demands. De Lora addresses the evolving debates about the legality of sexual and reproductive rights regarding issues such as abortion and surrogate motherhood in Spain and beyond. The added complexities of reproductive technologies raise a number of difficult legal questions about new articulations of eugenics as well as women's rights and exploitation. Begin considers the ethical issues surrounding the case of Ramón Sampederro's right to assisted suicide and the role of Amenábar's film *Mar adentro* in swaying public opinion towards Sampederro's position. These essays examine and challenge normative notions of human life, its endings and beginnings, as well as the role of multinational corporations and governments in regulating and categorizing behavior and consumption. Circumstance is re-considered, then, not merely as a social situation but rather as a network of legal, economic, political and nonhuman beings that construct human life: an experience that, following these contributions, is currently under dramatic transformation.

The environment is another black box in question throughout multiple contributions. While the volume is not unilaterally dedicated to environmental questions, a major tenor of the collection is the argument that a more inclusive definition of life is necessary to address ecological collapse in the geological age of the human. Of course, humans have always intervened in the environment. However, under the aegis of capitalism, we have recently altered the geological surface and bedrock of the planet. Progress, during the Anthropocene, implies a paradoxical causality: a human mastery that leaves in its wake a series of conditions and side effects that have become out of control. Consider, in the North American context, that the recently scrapped plan to drill for oil in the Chuckchi Sea had a 75 percent chance of producing a large oil spill, according to the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, which recently gave Shell Oil permission to drill in the area. As appalling as this "logic" may seem, political discourse is largely hesitant to engage in the destructive consequences of economically

motivated policy. To confront this systemic risk taking, what is needed is a renewed “concept of violence,” as Faber’s essay puts it: an interrogation of our (un)willingness to confront histories of violence as well as ways to consider invisible or semi-visible harm rendered to the environment.

Ecocriticism, as a critical field dedicated to environmental concern in predominantly literary texts, has focused overwhelmingly on English language texts; however, recent research interests have shifted towards non-English texts in an effort to think comparatively on a global scale (Buell 107). The Iberian Peninsula has, until very recently, remained sidelined in these comparative efforts. Moreover, Flys-Junquera and Raquejo Grado point out that progressive expressions of ecologically oriented literature and culture only seem to emerge toward the end of Francoism. There is, however, an environmentalist position imbedded within Francoism itself. Afinoguénova examines the connection between the tourism boom of the early 1970s and the environment. Disguised as improving “quality of life,” economic growth allied itself with a sinister environmentalism while continuing resource exploitation and offering little benefit to local environments or the people who inhabit these regions. The impact of these programs reverberated in towns throughout Spain and, indeed, continues to influence policy in many areas. One might look to Manuel Fraga’s reification of Galicia, the dormant Algarrobico Hotel on Andalucía’s coast, or Sheldon Adelson’s disturbingly oneiric Eurovegas proposals circulating in 2012 and 2013.

Over the past few decades, any eco-hesitation has transformed into a diverse range of authors engaging, either explicitly or implicitly, with ecological themes. Flys Junquera and Raquejo Grado also observe that, in order to engage the scope of this growing interest, critics must also look to other mediums such as action art and land art, which often occur outside the purview of the critical gaze in rural and peripheral areas. Another important medium to take into account is nonfiction writing. As Prádanos notes, other Spanish intellectuals have turned to nonfiction publications especially after the 2008 economic crisis hit Spain. He observes that the interdisciplinary work from authors, such as Jorge Riechmann, Alicia Puleo, and Ramón Fernández Durán, constitutes important economic alternatives to green-washed forms of capitalism. These thinkers would agree with the ethical condemnation of capitalism mentioned above: if the world is finite, then perpetual growth economies are unfeasible and stem from outright madness. Thinking from the vantage point of economic crisis does not, then, omit ecological concern, but rather helps these thinkers connect social issues to environmental issues, developing important contributions to environmental justice—meant to address the unequal exposure to environmental degradation and collapse based on class, gender, and race.

This connection between economic and environmental justice is also at work in Feinberg and Larson's essay on the architecture of Iñaki Ábalos and Juan Herreros alongside the thought of José Luis Pardo. The authors are interested in the empty urban and paraurban spaces of recently abandoned shopping centers, housing units or grocery stores, whose excess space is recycled by protest movements such as 15M. The authors rightly compare this transformation to a forest recently decimated by a fire. The ecologist does not look at the terrain as a desecrated site lost to life but rather as moment for new flora and fauna to take hold of the land. These unused, abandoned or discarded spaces become sites of excess beyond neoliberal ideology and thus might offer a space to connect or create without capitalism, including a future potential environmental ethics.

In his essay, Ares López puts the ethical question of coexistence on center stage and traces one history of human and nonhuman cohabitation: the early life of Marcos Rodríguez Pantoja, a child left isolated in a remote part of Andalucía. Ares López dissects the ambivalences in the filmic version *Entrelobos* compared to the transcribed interviews with Rodríguez Pantoja himself. While Olivares's film often instantiates the rigid divide between nature and culture via a narrative of blockbuster entertainment, it occasionally loops nonhuman habitation with human practices, entangling animal and human *Umwelten*. As Ares López suggests, such concern with nonhuman experience entails what Donna Haraway calls companion species, a *Mit-Dasein*, or being-with, that expresses more radical forms of Iberian "cohabitation" between species. It is important to note that coexistence need not entail frequent forms of environmental holisms, but rather a series of perplexing encounters between "strange strangers," as Timothy Morton describes them, whose differences are integral conduits to consider "the ecological thought" of coexistence (38–40).

To broaden ecocritical approaches to the Iberian Peninsula, it is also important to engage with texts that are not openly dedicated to environmental issues but rather implicitly disclose attitudes or environments in relationship to other themes or concerns. In these cases, it is up to the reader to decide how art challenges our everyday interaction with the environment. Beilin examines artistic resistance to the bleak and moribund circumstances of the Anthropocene in Iñárritu's film *Biutiful* and Fernández Mallo's novel *Nocilla experience*. While neither the film nor the novel solely addresses ecological concern, the environment is a major actant in both texts. Whereas *Biutiful* tracks its characters condemned to a slow death *inside* an economy driven by the hyperobject of currency exchange, *Nocilla experience* plays with "material consolation of all sorts" (104), as Beilin puts it, allowing chance to arrive as a possibility to deconstruct the consumerist materials of mass culture within the play of artistic expression. This last

point, as Zygmunt Bauman put it, considers art as “a blessing (or at least a chance of a blessing) in the dark” (137).

A third black box this volume examines is the Iberian Peninsula itself. Taking up the question of (non)life in the context of Iberia entails a transformation of the object of study, including a plethora of cultural practices and texts from a diverse linguistic backdrop. Viestenz focuses on political figurations of animal and beast operating in Salvador Espriu’s *La pell de brau*, reading the collection of poems as a critique of Francoist ideology and, moreover, as a poetic re-imagining of the peninsula as *Sepharad*, the Hebrew term for Hispania. For Viestenz, Espriu posits, to use Miguel DeLanda’s term, “a flat ontology,” which leaves aside hierarchical chains of being subjugating animals to human projects, or, for that matter, one language subordinated to another. In place of a petrified political life predicated on monolingualism, dialogue arrives as *energeia*: a federalist confluence of languages arriving from their reserved spaces of freedom. From the vantage point of Espriu’s poetry, then, developing an ethics of life becomes an integral, innovative approach to the study of the Iberian Peninsula precisely because it helps connect and re-think these reserved spaces, to reimagine the peninsula through a disciplinary federalism (Resina).

Beusterien offers a final, pedagogical insight to compliment Viestenz’s disciplinary reflection. After examining several ambivalences in Spanish media representations of animals, Beusterien concludes his essay on a pedagogical note. Beusterien uses the essay’s material to teach in West Texas and connect Iberian ecological concern with issues local to the university’s region. It opens a dialogue *between* places, analyzes beyond the strictures of the nation, to teach comparatively about ecology and culture. In conjunction with Viestenz’s proposal, as researchers and teachers, such a method involves thinking between different Iberian regions and languages, proving a newly enriched research and teaching program.

For the past few years, my research has assumed that Iberian Studies already contains the nutrients for considering the state of what I describe as interrelated ecological collectives: a plurality of systems of living and nonliving beings visible and invisible in our daily experience. I am interested in analyzing cultural objects that help us imagine and diagnose relationship between economic productivity and ecological necrosis as well as consider potential ways to ameliorate environmental degradation. Some of these strategies include new evaluations of the city’s relationship to the hinterland, questioning how we perceive the global and the local as well as rethinking suspicious relationships between nature and nationalism. I work with a variety of cultural objects including a Basque landscape paintings that transform humans into vegetables, Catalan novels that meditate on the legacy of Franco’s politics of hydroelectric dams, and, in my essay for this

volume, an amalgam of Galician protest art condemning the global shipping of petroleum near their coastlines. The project, then, urges us to think beyond the niche of the national, focusing, instead, on relations between regions and between different kinds of ecological thought.

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