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# Material Semiotics, Political Ecologies, Ethics of Life, and the Renewed Potential of the Humanities to Describe and Shape the World in the Anthropocene

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I am writing this essay from the beautiful public library of Santa Cruz: an affluent, small town near the city of A Coruña in Galicia, Spain. With a sizeable collection of books in Spanish and Galician on feminism, women's history, and gender issues, the library is situated in a small palace built in the seventeenth century and surrounded by a tree garden with some rare tree species ("Biblioteca"). Free cultural events are regularly held here and any town resident can reserve an adjacent public building and the tree garden at no cost to celebrate a community or family event ("Centros"). In this sense, the library is exemplary both as a public space and as a nice integration of nature and culture: precious trees and birds surrounding a palace open to all social strata that contains many of the books that helped to transform unjust gender relations over the last two centuries. Santa Cruz is not a typical Galician coastal town, though. It belongs to the larger municipality of Oleiros, which, since 1985, has been governed by a mayor who combines controversial radical-left discourse and imagery (the biggest sculpture of Che Guevara outside of Cuba welcomes the visitor) with political shrewdness and a great investment in public services and cultural programs, either free of charge or very affordable (Carretero). These include, for example, entertaining science lectures to young adults and one of the best public schools of music and dance of the region. The municipal and regional government's policies also include strict legal protection of trees, funding for a learning center on environmental topics (located in a seventeenth-century maritime fortress), the management of a center for the recovery of wild fauna in need of care, and the creation and preservation of numerous parks and a scenic protected area (declared "natural monument") where local wildlife coexists with its human neighbors within a very densely populated region with a high demand for real state ("Monumento"; "Equipamentos"; "Centros"). Because of these policies, Oleiros was finalist in the

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International Awards for Livable Communities in the category of "sustainable councils" and "for the quality of its gardens and green areas" (Villar).

These policies, which might be commonplace in other parts of the world (for example, in the city of Madison, Wisconsin, where I live), are exceptional in Galicia and might point out to what progressive politics in Spain should look like: more inexpensive and enlightening cultural programs and events (even in small towns and the periphery of the cities), more public libraries filled with books and other cultural products that challenge the reproduction of social inequalities and reflect the cultural and linguistic diversity of the region, more public spaces and services, and more green and wild areas for the enjoyment and cultivation of all. This amounts to good old social-democratic politics (mindful of the importance of culture as a common good) with the addition of a green consciousness of the necessity to conserve the local natural environment. In this way, nature, conceived as a local natural heritage (a "natural monument"), is preserved in an analogous way to the architectonic heritage and the intellectual history conserved in Santa Cruz's library for public use. One may think that, if this model of local management spread to other areas, life in the Iberian Peninsula (measured locally or nationally in biodiversity rates, educational success, or indexes of "quality of life") would be richer and better. Certainly, I do think there is a lot of good sense in this idea.

And yet, from the current historical perspective, some shady but crucial realities are missing from this bright picture of Oleiros. In the following pages, I will trace some of these, connecting the municipality of Oleiros with *messy* and *meshy* cultural-environmental processes that may seem hard to pinpoint, both materially and semiotically. Furthermore, I will discuss how these realities and processes demand a much-needed reconsideration of our inherited understandings of (and critical approaches to) nature, culture and politics. Along the way, I will briefly comment on the diverse ways the essays of *Ethics of Life: Contemporary Iberian Debates* respond to this demand and point out to new historically-situated and materially-grounded forms of understanding (Iberian) cultures and societies.

Even if for most of the twentieth century the principal economic activity in Oleiros was fishing and agriculture, during the last twenty years this municipality increasingly became fashionable as a residential place for middle and upper class families; families who, for the most part, work or study in the neighbor city of A Coruña. Oleiros is well known in Galicia as the residence of the family of Amancio Ortega, the founding chairman of the transnational clothing corporation Inditex (whose headquarters are located in the near municipality of Arteixo) and the fourth richest person in the world in 2015, according to *Forbes* ("The World's Billionaires"). Many executives of Inditex (such as the current president Pablo Isla) and other transnational

companies live in the municipality's territory (Carretero; Amado). Because of this, Oleiros became a *rurban* hybrid of a Galician-speaking rural territory and a Spanish-speaking (sub)urban space plugged-in not only to the city of A Coruña but also to the planning and management of the production, distribution and marketing of clothes at a global scale (Blanco and Salgado). The sociological makeup of the municipality also makes it a good example of what in Galicia is popularly called "urbanismo espallado" (dispersed urbanism). In contrast with Galicia's traditional concentration of residential buildings in hamlets, parishes, villages, or towns—and with the likewise traditional and still widespread use of the family house's adjoining plots to grow vegetables for self-consumption—the new middle and upper-class residents of Oleiros live in geographically dispersed mansions, *chalets*, and residential areas, often equipped with private swimming pools and large stretches of lawn (Gómez and Piñera; Barros). For their daily transportation to A Coruña, and even to go to the nearby beach towns of Santa Cruz or Mera, most of Oleiros's population depends exclusively on the use of private cars, which makes the traffic very dense all-year-round in the area (Amado).

In this sense, the green and livable municipality of Oleiros, like the many areas where "urbanismo espallado" is taking hold, represents a Galician version of the oil-dependent and environmentally costly suburban sprawl of the United States. Again, the example of Madison comes to my mind, as well as the deep contradictions and shortcomings that result from environmental policies and practices subordinated to the personal enjoyment of "nature," to neo-liberal notions of "quality of life," and to the marketing of neo-pastoral imaginaries. This subordination implies that urbanites with means can fulfill their aspirations to improve their lives, and even support the conservation of the environment, by consuming picturesque landscapes and pristine wildernesses via the leisure industry and rural tourism or by acquiring a residence in a periurban countryside. It also implies that, as long as global capitalism is able to preserve this picturesque stretches of Nature and wildlife for the leisure and enjoyment of some, it can sustainably continue its unsustainable route to unlimited economic growth. This route is made politically easier when the most unpleasant and ugly aspects of the massive industrial production and circulation of stuff—such as environmental degradation or the exploitation of child labor by Asian Inditex providers—are kept out of the sight of the public of the Global North (Pardo; Bolinches; Leonard and Conrad). In her essay for the volume, Afinoguénova traces back this "pseudo-environmentalism" and this idea of "quality of life" to late-Francoist ideologues. As Afinoguénova demonstrates, this discourse on life and the environment in Spain was adopted from the emerging Euro-American doctrine of "sustainable development" and customized in order to suit the dictatorship's political interests. By means of its legal consecration in the 1978 Spanish

Constitution, and after further adaptations to dominant neo-liberal ideologies, this discourse became one of the most powerful environmental discourses in the last decades.

With the demise of Galician small-scale farming (*minifundismo*) and the *feiras* (weekly local markets) where peasants used to sell their produce, most of the region's agricultural, livestock, and fish/seafood production has undergone profound socio-environmental transformations since the 1960s and 1970s. These transformations, which most historians generally describe as successful processes of *modernization*, consisted in the concentration of the food supply in the hands of agroindustries increasingly specialized and integrated in global capitalist markets (Carmona and Fernández 279–282; Veiga 45–46). The success of agroindustries has been defined by their capacity to increase exponentially the agricultural output (particularly of fish/seafood, meat and milk) of previous times generating capital for further expansion and contributing to change the diets and consuming habits of the population (Carmona and Fernández 279–282). Dotted with periodical crisis provoked by the fall of prices and European Union enforced restrictions to local production, this story of capitalist success is rarely counterbalanced by the fact that industrial livestock farming is one of the main sources of greenhouse emissions and that industrial bio-tech farming is highly-pollutant, energy-wasteful, and a potential threat to human health and local ecosystems (Archer 120–124; Shiva). Even if in the last decade the production of food stuffs *ecológicos* or *orgánicos* has been growing, these products are mainly targeted to foreign niche markets (Alvite). As in other regions of Spain, most of Galicia's agroindustrial production employs Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs), pesticides, herbicides, fertilizers, and growth-promoting hormones that increase productivity and lower costs (for the debates and policies in relation to the introduction of GMOs in the Spanish State, see the chapter of Suryanarayanan and Beilin in the volume).

Whereas Galicia is well known in the rest of the Spanish state for the quality of its food and its gastronomical traditions, for many Galicians, the consumption of *traditional* local dishes is perceived as one of the key elements of their cultural identity (Miguélez-Carballeira 9). In Oleiros and elsewhere, gastronomical festivities and fairs are among the most popular touristic and community events ("Fiestas"). Yet, local production is far from sufficient to keep this voracious identity-formation and this service and tourism industries going. For that reason, the food-stuffs used to prepare many of the traditional local dishes often arrive from other continents. A paradigmatic case is the highly intelligent and fast-growing invertebrate *Octopus Vulgaris*, who constitutes the main ingredient for the best known and most craved dish of Galician gastronomy: *pulpo a feira*. According to a guide published by the NGO, *Ecologistas en Acción*, "because of the high consumption of octopus, nearly 80% is imported (mostly from Africa and, to

a lesser extent, from Asia), the other 20% comes from Spain's national fisheries, from the Spanish fleet that fishes abroad, or from imports from countries of the EU" (Chaparro 245). The same guide warns that "very little data exists on the state of octopus populations . . . There are no assessments about this species in the North Atlantic region, while in the Eastern zone of the South Atlantic (African Coast), according to FAO, current evaluations warn about overexploitation in most of fisheries" (Chaparro 245–246, my translation). Apparently, locals and tourists who are catered with an *authentic* Galician culinary (based on the massive transformation of wild and farm animals into meat and fish) are not aware that most Galician and Iberian people had a vegetable-based seasonal diet, complemented with some meat and dried cod, until the explosion of agroindustries and urbanization in the late twentieth century (Alonso 241). All these are *cultural* processes in which sentiments of autochthony and enjoyment and the marketing of places as touristic destinations merge with unsustainable fishing practices, and the biological cycles of smart cephalopods in increasingly acidified oceans (Archer 130). This attention to what is beyond *culture* in the conventional sense situates Hobsbawm's famous notion of "invented tradition" in a refreshing socio-environmental perspective, and also points out to the fact that cultures have always operated as nodes where, in Haraway's wording, multiple species *meet* (*When Species Meet*). In his contribution to the volume, Beusterien analyses the representation of animals in Spanish newspapers in a similar light, as a space where we can discern the connections between nature and culture.

Other shady realities of Oleiros connect this place, not only with the global economy, but with the whole biosphere. While I write these lines in Santa Cruz, in July of 2015, there is (another) heat wave in Europe. On June 29, the highest temperature in the historical record for this month was reached in Santiago de Compostela (37.8 ºC) and Madrid (39.7 ºC), where the unbearable heat became the exclusive conversation topic whenever I talk to my family and friends there (Corral). In the previous month, an even harsher heat wave have caused more than two thousand deaths in India in a few days (Thompson and Climate Central). Earlier in the year, severe droughts provoked social distress and water restrictions in some of the most populated areas of the Americas. São Paulo's population suffered unprecedented water restrictions (Whately and Lerer) and California is enduring the worst drought in the last 1200 years (Griffin and Anchukaitis). Empirical data across the historical record shows that the vast, sustained and increasing human consumption of fossil fuels since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution is transforming the atmosphere (and, consequently, the entire biosphere), provoking a Global Warming of threatening consequences. Among these predicted consequences are the collapse of economic activity in numerous regions of the Earth and a massive extinction of species

(Pachauri et al.). Thus, the idea that the destruction or conservation of the environment depends exclusively on the activity "on the ground" of natives, local governments, states or empires has given way to a more complex picture in which the distinctions between local and global, natural and man-made, scientific management and planetary vulnerability, have literally melted in the air. Global Warming has also transformed the ways in which we conceive and define ecological catastrophe and environmental responsibility and debt (Simms). Popular initiatives to keep away the transnational oil tanker fleet from Galicia's coast in order to avoid devastating oil spills such as the Prestige's (see Trevathan's essay in the volume) will not help to stop an environmental catastrophe so slow-paced and so massive that it defies our cognitive capabilities and may create havoc tens of thousands of miles away. But, of course, educated citizens in Spain and elsewhere are already familiar with Global Warming. Spanish mainstream media keep us informed about it in the sections dedicated to scientific or environmental issues in which experts and journalists explain the new data, predictions and the possible remedies to alleviate the situation (Enríquez; Valdehíta; Elcacho; "Así se ven"). Nonetheless, macro-economic data such as the expected "growth" of the national Gross Domestic Product (GNP), the "recovery" of Personal Consumption Expenditures (PCE), or the number of foreign tourists visiting Spain take precedence in the headlines along with sports, corruption scandals, the daily events of party politics, wars in foreign nations, and domestic acts of violence. Therefore, "environmental issues" share with "cultural" ones their allocation in informational niches that *must* fit (even if they hardly fit rationally) a much larger social, political and economic frame dominated by the unquestioned tenets of mainstream economics (either neo-classical or neo-Keynesian), capitalism, and high consumerism. In his contribution to the volume Prádanos has commented on this contradiction and how Spanish nonfiction writers have addressed it from the theoretical perspective of ecological economics and the degrowth movement (Prádanos).

Material realities and historical processes such as the ones I have described so far put a critical shade on the bright picture of a green, livable, and sustainable capitalism in Europe; also they outline a radically new picture of what nature, culture, politics, ethics, beauty, and life in our planet is (and was) about. While these material realities can be clearly observed in events and debates (mostly among scientists and other "experts"), they often fall under the radar of ordinary human perception and political common sense. In consonance with this, new concepts and tropes have been proposed to name them. Some examples of this new critical language are "Anthropocene" (Crutzen and Stoermer), "natureculture" (Latour, *We have*; Haraway, *Simians*), human-nonhuman "collectives" (Latour, *Reassembling*), "social metabolism" (Martínez-Alier), "hyperobjects" (Morton), "slow

violence" (Nixon), and "disquieting realism" (Beilin, in her contribution to the volume). To these we may add the well-known attachment of the prefix "bio-" to the traditional concepts of "ethics" and "politics" in order to refer to the ethical and political spaces generated by the regulation of life processes by the modern state, and the emergence of biotechnologies and new reproductive technologies. The essays of *Ethics of Life: Contemporary Iberian Debates* engage with some of these realities, events, concepts, and debates opening new paths for Iberian cultural criticism and the study of the cultural history of the Iberian Peninsula. These realities and theoretical perspectives, in which material and semiotic processes merge, are reconfiguring a new terrain for interdisciplinary academic enquiry, democratic debate, and political struggle in relation to the ethics, politics and aesthetics of life. This terrain is situated beyond (or before, or around, or across) the crumbling but persistent anthropocentric illusions of Western Modernity and its expansionary-emancipatory obsessions: technological progress, rational detachment from corporeal and material reality, unlimited economic growth, and the contradictory dynamics between the enshrinement of individual subjectivity and freedom and the biopolitical governance of humans (and nonhumans) as uniform *populations* of living bodies. In fact, some of the contributions to the volume explore how these Modern illusions and obsessions took root in the semi-peripheral Iberian states and historical communities generating material-semiotic arrangements that put in risk not only the present and future flourishing of human and nonhuman life (Beilin; Prádanos; Afinoguenova; Suryanarayanan and Beilin), but also the ethical and political lessons that might be drawn from the inescapable connections of present-day Iberian peoples with political violence throughout the twentieth century (Faber; Viestenz).

As the groundbreaking work of Bruno Latour, Phillip Descola, Donna Haraway and many others has shown, the illusions and obsessions of Modernity are based on an onto-epistemological division between a nonhuman *nature* and our human *culture* and politics. This ideological division, which has historical roots in the Scientific Revolution and the emergence of the modern state in seventeenth-century Europe, is crumbling for many reasons (Latour, *We Have Never*). First, it does not hold up to empirical sociological or ethnographic examinations that pay attention to the agency of nonhuman objects and life forms (such as soils, subterranean matter of fossil origin, chemical substances, minerals, genes, microbes, farmed animals, or atmospheric gasses) in the configuration of "society", social hierarchies, and power relations (Latour, *Reassembling*). Second, it is inconsistent with our post-Darwinian biological and ecological knowledge, which reveals the material and evolutionary continuum of life forms and the multiple dependencies and entanglements among living beings and non-organic matter. And, third, it needs to be historically situated along with

non-western and alternative forms of understanding the material continuum of the world and the interconnections between its beings (Descola; see also my own contribution to the volume, Ares López). These multiple beings, whose allocations, entanglements and interconnections cut across Modern fantasies of human exceptionalism, include not only humans, minerals, animals, and plants, but also technologies and semiotic processes. As Latour has shown, technologies and semiotic processes are at once cultural and natural, symbolic and material, since they circulate through material conduits and perform as active *mediators* (not just passive intermediaries) in the process of incorporating "natural" objects and phenomena into our "cultures" and "societies." In fact, the word *collectives* has been proposed in order to account for the agency and activity of nonhumans and to break away from the social-constructivist and culturalist explanations of the (post)modern Social Sciences (*Reassembling*). It is in this way that narratives, discourses and artifacts are contributing to shape the world as it is, to strain it beyond its biophysical limits, and to open unchartered paths to remake it in more just and life-friendly ways.

The *world* I am talking about, therefore, can only be understood as a strained assemblage of interconnected spaces, technologies, bodies, and bio-physical and material-semiotic processes. Ecological economists and environmental historians have clearly demonstrated that the material basis of human economies is found in the metabolic fluxes of energy and materials that connect (Post-)Modern urban and periurban spaces with rural or "uncivilized" territories within and beyond national borders. That is, the territories that capitalist corporations and the modern state (in any of its historical versions: liberal-democratic, communist or fascist) have colonized in their insatiable hunger for cheap labor, crops, minerals, energy, fossil fuels, and industrial waste dumps (Martínez-Alier; McNeill). As Eugenia Afinoguénova suggests in her chapter, the fact that some territories have been framed as a national heritage and managed as "natural" spaces preserved for leisure and tourism does not imply a rupture in this process but it is an intrinsic part of it. Moreover, as Suryanarayanan and Beilin point out when analyzing the case of Spain, the recent development of genetic bio-engineering has made possible that the colonizing processes associated with capitalism and Modernization extend to life itself. In their exemplary collaborative work between scholars with scientific and humanistic backgrounds, Suryanarayanan and Beilin also point out the key importance of national intellectual traditions and collective identities in how "technical" scientific debates and environmental policies are framed and develop.

The implications of the ideas I have exposed, so firmly grounded in the materiality of our everyday-life and in recent historical experience, are clear. This is not simply another theoretical "turn." The time has arrived for another big revolution in thought, in the political imagination, in our ways of

inhabiting the Earth, and in emancipatory political praxis. We can follow Jorge Reichmann and call this revolution a "second Enlightenment" or, as some post-humanist thinkers propose, we may cut our ideological ties with the Moderns in a more radical way. As the variety of proposals and approaches of the contributors to the volume shows, this is a plural revolution that can be transited through many paths and alliances. Yet, what is becoming clear is that if the humanities in general, and Hispanism in particular, aspire to be socially, culturally, and politically relevant in the twenty-first century, they need to engage critically with questions related to life, the environment, and the materiality of our *more-than-human world*. This requires a series of intellectual updates, adjustments, and reframings. In my view, these include unlearning Modern ways of encapsulating intellectual work, giving up postmodern habits of isolating semiotic and rhetorical processes from material ones, putting aside outdated clichés about the beauty or threatening otherness of Nature and the detached objectivity of scientific knowledge, recognizing the corporeal and material dimension of all knowledge and cultural processes, engaging critically with the sciences and social-sciences in a transdisciplinary frame, questioning both acritical celebrations of digital culture and nostalgic longings for the good-old anthropocentric Humanism, updating our ideals on social justice and well-being, going beyond our (Post)Modern multi-cultural understanding of the world in order to comprehend the *multiple natures* that stem from diverse human engagements with nonhumans, and, lastly, acknowledging that our culture is not only *human*, since it has developed through multiple interrelations with other animal and plant species, including many sentient animal species with which we can communicate and develop affective relations.

When many of the ontological, epistemological, ethical, and political certitudes of Modernity are melting with the poles, other historically-situated convictions, attachments, practices, sensibilities, and knowledges are emerging (or being rediscovered) beyond the complacent skepticism of the Post-Moderns and the rise of new fundamentalisms. Academic attention to these processes is giving rise to something that in the English-Speaking academia has been called Post-Humanities and Environmental Humanities. Whatever it is called, this new way of looking at and writing about culture aims to renew the potential of the Humanities to provide convincing accounts of the world and critically intervene in shaping it. *Ethics of life: Contemporary Iberian Debates* is a timely collective effort to engage with this change of episteme, with the past, present, and future realities it illuminates, and with the alternative picture of the Iberian Peninsula that

arises from these. In so doing, it is also an effort of envisioning new frames, new routes, and new agendas for Hispanism in the twenty-first century.

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