

# DISSOLVING THE FALSE DIVIDE: LITERARY STRATEGIES FOR RE-SITUATING HUMANS ECOLOGICALLY AND NON-HUMANS ETHICALLY\*

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## ABSTRACT

Dualistic thinking has led Western civilization to a logic of domination which justifies the exploitation over those perceived as others, among which is nature. Following primarily philosopher Val Plumwood's analysis of dualisms, this article takes up her call for developing counter-hegemonic strategies to change this logic, adopting a new cultural paradigm that would grant non-human others ethical consideration. The article explores diverse literary strategies, with examples in contemporary American literature, that dismantle the false dichotomies human/non-human and mind/matter, allowing readers to re-situate humans within the biosphere and develop a dialogical and communicative relationship with earth others that would provide an adequate ethical response to the non-human world.

KEY WORDS: Dualisms, hyper-separation, ecological embeddedness, dialogism, human/non-human, otherization of nature, nature's agency, biophilia, giving voice to nature, ethics of care.

## RESUMEN

El pensamiento dualístico ha llevado a la civilización occidental a desarrollar una lógica de dominación que justifica la explotación de aquellos percibidos como el otro, entre ellos la naturaleza. Basado principalmente en el análisis de dichos dualismos realizado por la filósofa Val Plumwood, este artículo responde a su llamamiento de desarrollar estrategias contra-hegemónicas para cambiar esta lógica y adoptar un nuevo paradigma cultural que concediera una consideración ética a los seres no-humanos. El artículo explora diversas estrategias literarias, con ejemplos extraídos de la literatura norteamericana contemporánea, que desmontan las falsas dicotomías, humano/no-humano y mente/materia, permitiendo que los lectores resitúen los seres humanos dentro de su biosfera contextual para así desarrollar una relación dialógica y comunicativa con otros seres naturales con el fin de alcanzar una adecuada respuesta ética al mundo no-humano.

PALABRAS CLAVE: dualismos, hiper-separación, arraigo ecológico, dialogismo, humano/no-humano, la otredad de la naturaleza, "agencialidad" de la naturaleza, biofilia, dar voz a la naturaleza, ética del cuidado.





In our current globalized world everything is defined in terms of economic and political jurisdictions. We are obsessed with the market, an abstract “confidence game” which determines whether countries are rated well or poorly, and whether people have jobs or not, have homes or are forced to leave them. Only the numbers of the stock market, foreign debt, bank capitals and so forth seem to be important. Everything is quantified with numbers, leaving the natural side of events out. While humans have been defined as social beings, our social relationships are increasingly more abstract, dwelling in virtual networks with minimal human contact or face to face interaction. Moreover, we have less and less contact with nature as we live in our sheltered constructed worlds. As philosopher Val Plumwood states in *Environmental Culture*, this contributes to our sense of disembeddedness; we have lost track of our physical place within the world and have ceased to see ourselves as ecologically constrained beings. This self-enclosure as humans denies our material reality as natural beings dependent on the biosphere. We humans cling to our rationality and faith in quick techno-fixes for all problems, including environmental ones, but our decisions concerning our lifestyle and the environment do not appear to be rational at all. We can see and scientifically prove the disaster we are headed for, given the rate of climate change, deforestation, ocean degradation, species extinction, and mounting toxic wastes but we “rationally” decide to continue “full speed ahead” with “business as usual.” Even after the major financial crisis, which highlights the flaws in the system, no substantial changes have been made in the financial markets, nor has our system been seriously questioned. What is more, given the concern over the financial crisis, any attempts to address environmental issues have virtually been abandoned. One might do well to question our supposed rationality.

We need to change our course to avoid disaster, to change the way we do business, to change our culture. Although there are scientific and technological solutions which can contribute to a more sustainable lifestyle, we are not applying them consistently. When some aspect of business “goes green” it is usually because there is an underlying profit in it. The values of our culture seem to be based solely on the market. Thus, our environmental crisis, among others, is not a question of technology but rather of values; either we develop a culture that values the environment and other species, or the disaster will not be avoided. We need a culture that acknowledges our ecological embeddedness and dependence on the biosphere and which views non-human others in terms of ethics. Our dominant Western rationalist culture hinges on dualistic thinking, such as mind/body, human/nature or civilized/primitive. It privileges the mind over matter, human over non-human, science and technology over natural systems, and minimizes our dependency on nature. This has led to the logic of domination where colonizing cultures have dominated other smaller, but ecologically-adapted cultures. Our society values success, but we define success by material gain and exploitation. Quality of living is rated on na-

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\* The research for this article was funded by the project “CLYMA” (Ref: IUENUAH-2009/003) of the Franklin Institute for American Studies of the Universidad de Alcalá.

tional GNP, abstract figures of economical indicators, rather than the measure of the alternative GNH (Gross National Happiness—a measure of well-being and happiness). We need a change of values and discourse, one that would re-situate humans in ecological terms and the non-human in ethical terms. But this requires a major shift of cultural paradigms, one that cannot be dictated by authorities or legislation. The objective of this article is to illustrate how different literary strategies can contribute towards this re-situating of the human and non-human, dissolving the false divide between mind and matter, human and nature. For this purpose, I will first look at some of the consequences of this dualistic thinking to later develop and illustrate how works of fiction can help us to re-assess and re-situate ourselves in this world.

Val Plumwood and other scholars such as Karen Warren, Carolyn Merchant and Freya Mathews amply track the development of dualistic thinking and its relationship to the scientific development of Western civilization. This dualistic thinking leads to a logic of domination and the othering of diverse peoples and species. Plumwood in her study, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* outlines the basic characteristics of dualistic thinking which she later develops in what she has called the “ecological crisis of reason” found in *Environmental Culture*. Dualistic thinking dates back to the early times of our culture and human centeredness. Dualism, according to Plumwood is “an emphatic and distancing form of separation (hyper-separation or disassociation) which creates a sharp ontological break or radical discontinuity between groups identified as the privileged “centre” and those subordinated” (101).<sup>1</sup> She points out that most hegemonic centrisms are based on dualisms and that the representations of these, as different from distinctions and dichotomies, have the ability to create their own realities. Edward Said, in *Orientalism*, observes that the vision of the centered group and the material reality of these created realities prop each other up and help sustain themselves, in such a manner that the other is “contained and represented by dominating frameworks” (40–44). These dualistic constructions end up in polarizations and false dichotomies (Plumwood 101) which characterize our perception of realities and others. The consequences of these dualisms have been studied by feminists and postcolonial scholars. Dualism, as Plumwood structures, is characterized by five characteristics: radical exclusion, backgrounding, instrumentalization, incorporation and homogenization.<sup>2</sup> These characteristics have made the others available to the center and have been used to justify and to rationalize their treatment. A brief description of each will illustrate their implication for earth others and constitute the necessary framework for the literary strategies which follow.

Radical exclusion or hyper-separation refers to the fact that we tend to define ourselves by that which we are not, by that which separates ourselves from the other, emphasizing the difference and creating a sharp impermeable boundary. Ra-

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes from Plumwood are from *Environmental Culture*.

<sup>2</sup> See chapter 5 for a more detailed analysis.



tionality is one such thing that has been used to define human beings, and initially solely man. The ability to reason has been the defining characteristic as early as Aristotle, who in his *Nicomachean Ethics* affirms that “reason more than anything else is man” (Book X, chapter 7). Feminist, postcolonial and ethnic studies scholars can easily recall historical examples in which women were considered inferior to men because they allegedly were not rational, rather emotional. Likewise, slaves, indigenous peoples and other racialized minorities have a long history of being considered inferior because their skull bone structure was smaller, their skin color darker or because they allegedly could not reason. Hyper-separation implies marking the other as inferior and denying any possibility that the other might have any similar qualities to those of the dominant group. In the case of nature, the fact that animals and other living organisms are not “rational” results in their “clear” inferiority. Their inability to reason is often coupled with other related qualities. Arguments which have often been made to judge animals as inferior are their alleged inability to suffer or to establish affective relationships, show loyalty and so forth. As in the case of women and other marginalized peoples, this has been proven false and science today is demonstrating mental and emotional qualities in many animals. But traditionally, in our culture, reason has been the yardstick by which worth and more importantly, moral value, has been measured and thus nature and non-human others have been considered inferior, with no ethical consideration.

A second characteristic is that which Plumwood calls backgrounding. The potential or contribution of the group which is othered is denied. Similarly with feminist and post-colonial history, the contribution of women and slaves or indigenous peoples has been neglected, omitted and denied. As a result, the center or the dominant hegemony cannot allow itself to be seen as dependent in any way on that other, who has no potential. Thus, the other is not needed and rendered totally unessential. In the case of nature and non-human others, since they have no potential and no ability to contribute, their role is omitted, denied and considered irrelevant. Nature is perceived as passive, an object, never a subject and humans deny our dependence on nature, despite the very obvious reliance on it—simply by thinking about our need of the sun, water or plants for food make the argument totally “irrational,” regardless of how “rational” our logic might be.

A third characteristic of dualist thinking is that of homogenization. Differences among the members of the otherized group are disregarded. These members are not individuals but a stereotyped non-entity, easily replaced and members are interchangeable. Thus, the argument goes one slave is the same as the next; all women are the same (emotional, weak, etc) and want to have children, and so forth. Similarly hegemonic centers tend to homogenize other cultures, languages and values, perceiving them as inferior or backwards. Recognizing diversity is unimportant and often viewed more of a problem than a wealth. Needless to say, one type of tree is as good as another, if one species become extinct, there are many more and so natural diversity is completely unimportant. As long as there are those species, both animal and plant, that we use, the rest are irrelevant.

A fourth characteristic of dualist thinking is incorporation or relational identity. The identity of the other is assimilated to that of the center: the melting



pot. The only values that have any worth are those of the hegemonic center. In our day and age, that implies the values associated with the market economy and capitalism. If the otherized group does not have those values, the group is deemed marginal, devalued and irrelevant. The identity of the marginalized group has often hinged on the identity of its “master.” For a long time, women’s worth and identity (and often that of slaves) depended on the worth of their husband (or master); they had no value or identity of their own. A classic example of the importance of adopting the values of the center is the clash over the concept of land: as private property for the colonizers and communal for indigenous peoples. The other, in order to be recognized, has to assimilate and adapt to the values of the center. The center feels the right to re-make the other in its self-image in order to recognize it. An illustrative example is the Spielberg film *Amistad* (about an 1839 slave mutiny), where, until the protagonist Cinqué starts “reading” the images of the Bible (his initiation to the values of Christianity) and wearing Westernized clothes to court and telling a structured narrative, imbued with values of justice, family and the right to freedom, he is totally ignored in court and not considered a human being. To a large degree women and members of minority groups have had to assimilate to most of the values of the hegemonic center (white Euroamerican patriarchy) in order to be recognized. Those who haven’t, remain marginal. In the case of nature, the difficulty is obvious. Because nature does not share our values, its needs are not recognized. Non-human others are only recognized to the degree that they can assimilate our values. For example, pets, in that they live with humans and respond with loyalty to human needs, have received some recognition, at least as sentient beings. To the degree that research is proving the similarities in the social organization of primates, we can see the development of the Great Ape Project which aims to award certain rights to great apes. But the great majority of non-human others are denied any needs or rights, or more importantly, any ethical consideration. The newly developing field of eco-justice is an attempt at redressing this prejudice.<sup>3</sup>

And finally the fifth characteristic is that of instrumentalism, closely linked to the previous. Because the other has no potential, no individuality, its subjecthood, agency and value are downgraded. If there is no agency or value, then the other has no ethical weight nor deserves any ethical consideration. If we owe it no respect, it becomes an object which we can use as we wish and there are no limits to our intrusion upon the other since it has no rights (or they are not recognized). Women were made to serve men, slaves to serve their masters, indigenous peoples to serve the colonizer. The master decided the needs of the other and these could be adapted to serve the needs of the center. This aspect is primarily the means by which the hegemonic center has justified its treatment and abuse of the other. In the case of nature, since the non-human other is clearly perceived as an object and usually non-sentient, any abuse or exploitation to serve the needs of the center are still justified. Obvious examples are animal testing for human products, the destruction of habi-

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<sup>3</sup> See Schlosberg and Nussbaum.



tats for housing, overfishing for consumption and so forth. In the case of nature, this abuse is not even considered an ethical issue since nature has no ethical weight, rather the exploitation is perceived as something legitimate, as the means to the needs of the center. Thus, these five characteristics illustrate how dualistic thinking contributes to the oppression and exploitation of those groups perceived as other. These conceptual borders which separate “people from animals, facilitate the indignities we wreak upon them” (Malamud 6). Dualistic thinking has served to create the logic of domination: the center is justified in dominating the other due to its perceived inferiority.

Nevertheless, the purpose of this article is not to denounce these injustices but rather to find and analyze literary strategies which might contribute to effect a change of this state of affairs. As Elizabeth Ammons, in her critique of the role of humanities, states, “If we do not include answers alongside critiques, hope alongside anger, and activism alongside discourse and *talk about both terms* in each of these pairs, what is the point?” (emphasis in original 12). This article discusses both terms and attempts one possible answer. Plumwood’s “counter-hegemonic” strategy in order to initiate the change of paradigm could be such a one. She argues that the logic of othering illustrates that it is “not the primitiveness and unworthiness of the other but our own species’ arrogance that is the main barrier to forming ethical and responsive relationships with earth others.” We need an “alternative self-critical rationality” to find the source of our attitudes towards nature (167). She suggests that this new paradigm be based on a dialogical relationship with earth others which would develop an interspecies ethics. One clear counter-hegemonic strategy Plumwood calls for is the breaking down of the human/nature dualism. Rather than insist on finding out which earth others “deserve” recognition due to their similarity with humans (a strategy of many animal rights advocates, of which Peter Singer and the Great Ape Project are examples), Plumwood suggests that we question what being human means and what anthropocentric prejudices are found in our otherizing stances which impede our relationship with earth others (168). Therefore, by dissolving the false dichotomy of human/nature, one could try to view all species as interdependent and with intrinsic value in themselves. She argues that the task is to adopt an “adequate ethical response to the non-human world:” one that would involve developing “narrative and communicative ethics and responses to the other, developing care and guardianship ethics, [...] [and] alternative conceptions of human virtue that include care for the non-human world...” These responses can be carried out by “developing the stances of openness and attention,” needed for “dialogical and communicative relationships of sensitivity, negotiation and mutual adaptation” (169-170). To do so, she argues that we need to change our vocabularies to “eliminate unwarranted and unnecessary rationalism and intellectualism” (174) and substitute these with an intentional stance of recognizing earth others as fellow agents and narrative subjects. This stance of openness would allow us to acknowledge the “agential and dialogical potentialities of earth others” and to “re-animate nature” (177). Precisely an animate nature was common to myth and remains so in many indigenous societies and is something which poets have very frequently represented; Plumwood notes that, ironically, this function of poets has



often distinguished them, negatively, from the prestige awarded to philosophy (N 17, 263). Ammons usefully points out that an essential value of literature (and the humanities in general) “resides in the power of texts to teach us about ourselves, [...] [and also] in the power of words to inspire us, to transform us, to give strength and courage for the difficult task of *re-creating the world*” (emphasis in original 14).

This article therefore seeks to highlight some counter-hegemonic strategies in contemporary literature that would dissolve these false divides created by dualistic thinking and re-animate nature. One counter-hegemonic stance derived from these theories is the recognition of the continuity of the human and non-human and their interdependence. It is a question of focusing on our similarities rather than our differences, while accepting those differences and embracing the value of diversity and the intrinsic value of each species, thus negating our tendency of hyper-separation. It also implies the recognition of our own human animality, striving for a mind-body unity that privileges neither term. Philosopher, Freya Mathews also suggests in her book, *For Love of Matter*, the need for a non-dualistic view of matter which would put the “mind in matter and matter in mind” (27) and find a way to “sing back to life a world that has become so brutally silenced” (8). Adopting this open stance, one of listening, of recognizing the communicative potential of earth others and acknowledging their agency is of dire necessity. The issue of agency in nature is currently undergoing much debate, particularly from the perspective of material feminisms and material ecocriticism. Many philosophers and critics are attempting to divest the concept of agency from the human concept of intentionality in order to understand non-human agency. For example, philosopher and physicist Karen Barad speaks of agential realism where “the universe is agential interactivity in its becoming. The primary ontological units are not “things” but phenomena—dynamic topological reconfiguring /entanglements /relationalities / (re)articulations. [...] Agency is not an attribute but the ongoing reconfiguring of the world” (135). Thus, both human and non-human nature have agency simply by their “doing” or “being” in the world and are inextricably entangled and meshed together. Although I will not dwell on this developing theory,<sup>4</sup> the notion of non-human agency is certainly one that needs to be addressed in any counter-hegemonic strategy. As previously mentioned, poets have “heard” nature speak all along. In his study of animal literature, Malamud defends the concept of an “empathizing imagination,” one that “can be enlisted to enhance the awareness of sentient, cognitive, ethical, and emotional *affinities between people and animals*” (emphasis in original 9). Therefore, it is my contention that through diverse literary strategies writers and poets can help us imagine and perceive a different relationship with all earth others. Literature can certainly develop that narrative and communicative response to the other which Plumwood suggested. Fiction, with its imaginative truth, can dissolve the dualism of human/nature and allow us to see that communicative potential and

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<sup>4</sup> See S. Alaimo and S. Hekman, eds., *Material Feminisms*.



agency of the non-human and provide an essential step in the re-creation of worldly relationships.

As mentioned, one first strategy would be to affirm the continuity and interdependence between the human and the non-human in an effort to undermine the dualistic hyper-separation. Numerous writers weave this interdependence throughout their work. For example, writer Rudolfo Anaya, long considered the “poet of the llano” and known for the archetypal values to his landscapes, always emphasizes the intimate relationship between his human characters and their environment. He readily acknowledges his dependence on nature when he recalls that his “earliest memories were molded by the forces in [his] landscape: sun, wind, rain, the llano, the river. And all of these forces were working to create the people that walked across [his] plane of vision” (“Writer’s” 99). Likewise he affirms the continuity between the human and the non-human when he states that “The landscape changes man, and the man becomes landscape” (“Writer” 46). Moreover, a reciprocal relationship with earth others is emphasized in many of his characters. For example, Antonio, the young protagonist of Anaya’s first and best known novel *Bless Me, Ultima*, has his epiphany in landscape when he realizes that he was “a very important part of the teeming life of the llano and the river” (37). This entanglement between different species is also reiterated in his more recent Sonny Baca detective series. In the first of the quartet, *Zia Summer*, Don Eliseo, spiritual mentor for Sonny, explains that “the raices, Sonny, beneath the earth the roots of all these trees stretch far, connecting to other trees, until the entire valley is connected. You can’t kill a tree and not kill the past. The trees are like the gente [people] of the valley, sooner or later we’re all related....How can I cut down my history?” (*Zia* 75). Eliseo clearly exhibits that ethics of care when he refuses to cut down a tree which has been tagged by municipal authorities as dead and decides to nurse it back to health, “his ear pressed against the tree, like a doctor to the heartbeat of a patient” (5). Eliseo feels “like that old tree,...dry, but still alive”(66). Moreover, the final highlight of the novel is not Sonny’s victory over Raven, rather the fact that “the viejecitos of the valley would remember it was the summer when Don Eliseo’s tree recovered miraculously and offered forth its green leaves” (386). People in Anaya’s novels share reactions with animals, and natural phenomenon affect the daily lives of both: “The moods of the city swung to the moods of the weather. The desert people of the high, arid Río Grande plateau were like horny toads, they could go a long time without rain, but they paid the price. The dry electricity in the air created a tension within, a fiery disposition that put nerves on edge” (*Zia* 224). Humans and on-humans coexist on the same level.

In a similar manner, writer Terry Tempest Williams emphasizes the interrelationships between human and non-human in the very structure of her autobiography, *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*. Each chapter is titled with the name of a bird from the Migratory Bird Refuge, and the rising level of the Great Salt Lake. In each chapter, William’s personal story runs parallel to the fate of the birds, where different species are individualized, and the level of the lake—the three elements are inseparable, both in the structure of the book and in the events that take place. The birds, the land and her family are treated with similar care. In the





writing, Williams acknowledges this relationship explicitly: “The birds and I share a natural history. It is a matter of rootedness, of living inside a place for so long that the mind and imagination fuse” (21). The relationship between humans is intermeshed with the relationships to the land: “Our attachment to the land was our [she and her grandmother] attachment to each other” (15). Similarly, Linda Hogan throughout her novels emphasizes the continuity between the human and the non-human. In *Solar Storms*, Angela realized that she “was part of the same equation as birds and rain” (79). As Malamud suggests, the goal of literary texts on animals should be to “situate poet/reader and animal as coterminous; cohabitants; simultaneous, and thus ecologically and experientially equal” (33). I would suggest that this can also apply to all earth others, each with their own characteristics and needs.

Thus, these three writers, among many others, show different ways of emphasizing the continuity and interdependence between humans and non-humans. These passages do not attempt to homogenize the earth others or to judge them by human standards; rather they strive to illustrate points in common. We have already seen examples of placing earth others on the same plane as humans. In some cases, writers stress the common animality of all beings, thus making the point further. This is not only an aspect of a literary imagination. E.O. Wilson, a renowned writer (twice Pulitzer Prize winner) and Harvard Professor of Science provides a possible scientific (and thus “rational”) answer. In 1984 Wilson put forth the “biophilia hypothesis.” Biophilia, he believes is the “innately emotional affiliation of human beings to other living organisms.” He further expands: “Innate means hereditary and hence part of ultimate human nature. Biophilia, like other patterns of complex behavior, is likely to be mediated by rules of prepared and counterprepared learning—the tendency to learn or to resist learning certain responses as opposed to others” (31). Thus, biophilia is both a learned and genetically encoded attitude which still persists. However, in Western cultures today this affinity has been weakened and “untaught,” remaining, to a large degree encoded in ritual and myth (31), while it remains more active in diverse indigenous cultures, where we can find multiple examples, both in their rituals and beliefs as well as in their literatures.

In Linda Hogan’s *People of the Whale*, the traditional song of the tribe emphasizes this shared animality and reciprocity: “Grandmother whale, Grandfather whale. If you come to land we have beautiful leaves and trees. We have warm places. We have babies to feed and we’ll let your eyes gaze upon them. We will let your soul become a child again. We’ll pray it back into a body. It will enter our bodies. You will be part human. We’ll be part whale” (*People* 22-23). This passage reminds us of Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “becoming-animal,” the fluidity between and among species. Deleuze and Guattari revert to myth as a place where the prevalence of inter-species transformations and transmigrations highlight the continuity and affinity between species. Myth challenges rigid species distinctions; however, Deleuze and Guattari take it further and affirm that “becoming” implies alliance between species (Malamud 11). The importance of myth is not only mentioned by Wilson and Deleuze and Guattari, but Freya Mathews also insists on the need for myths and a cosmological rehabilitation to give our cultures their viability, a workable





worldview which would counter the dead end which Newtonianism has led us to. She proposes panpsychism, a theory in which “all things are included in one all-embracing consciousness in a manner which displays itself as their containment in a single spatiotemporal system” (*For Love* 28). Panpsychism rejects the dualistic thinking of the Cartesian and Newtonian foundations of classic mechanistic science and according to Mathews, can serve to re-animate nature.<sup>5</sup>

One of the elements most used to hyper-separate humans from non-humans is that of language. The human capacity to speak, to construct an abstract system of communication has been considered as a major feature of our rationality, and thus an example of human superiority and an exercise of intellectualism. Earth others are backgrounded by denying their potential to communicate. Thus, a second counter-hegemonic strategy would be to question the superiority of human language for communication. Donna Haraway notes that “Nature may be speechless, without language, in the human sense; but nature is highly articulate. Discourse is only one process of articulation” (“Promises” 324). Human speech, thus, is only one manner of articulating feelings or messages. Haraway continues that “to articulate is to signify.” She plays on Descartes’ rationalism and clarifies: “We articulate; therefore, we are” (“Promises” 324). Haraway like Plumwood and Mathews, bring us back to the Cartesian attempt to venerate reason and relegate all other ways of knowing as inferior. Although Haraway continues her argument in a different direction, she does question the establishment of distinct boundaries and categories of beings. Her repositioning of subjectivity and perception is important as is her argument against the boundary of science vs. culture and the objectivity of the former. She argues for the need to find a way to perceive nature with a different gaze, other than that of reification and possession (“Promises” 296). Given our tendency to consider rationality as a marker of superiority, and with that language, one literary strategy is precisely to question the role of language. Language may be a form of articulation, and certainly is central to a literary work that relies on language, but literature can also illustrate how language creates barriers. Ursula LeGuin, in “She Unnames Them,” one of the stories of her collection of poems and stories, *Buffalo Gals and Other Animal Presences*, plays on the passage from *Genesis* where Adam names all the animals. In this case, Eve “unnames” the animals in an effort to dissolve the boundary between human and non-human created by names and language. Once she has done so, Eve reflects that the animals

seemed far closer than when their names had stood between myself and them like a clear barrier: so close that my fear of them and their fear of me became one same fear. And the attraction that many of us felt, the desire to smell one another’s scales or skin or feathers or fur, taste one another’s blood or flesh, keep one another arm,—that attraction was now all one with the fear, and the hunter could not be told from the hunted, nor the eater from the food. (235)

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<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the need of cosmology and myth, see F. Mathews, *The Ecological Self*. For her defense of panpsychism, see *For Love of Matter*.

This text comments on the act of naming, which has long been considered a form of exercising power over those silent or silenced. As the names are “returned,” Eve perceives the increased closeness between the human (who has left behind the marker of superiority) and the non-human. Both are on the level now, tentatively and fearfully exploring the new relationship. In this text, LeGuin breaks down the human/non-human divide where skin and scales and fur and feathers become simply different types of “clothing,” acknowledging the diversity but rendering it meaningless from a hierarchical value perspective. At the end of the story, when Eve has also given back her name to Adam and leaves the Garden of Eden, she realizes that the change is difficult and that it requires a whole new perspective, a new language: “my words now must be as slow, as new, as single, as tentative as the steps I took going down the path away from the house...” (236). Nevertheless, she is committed to the change in values, to finding a new way to relate to the non-human world, one in which all species would be equally valued and accorded an ethical dimension.

Language as a barrier to expressing, hearing or perceiving the real truth is also addressed by Linda Hogan in her novels. In *Solar Storms* Angela finds humans to be inarticulate: “most of us had inarticulate souls, silent spirits” (181). She is also taught, here echoing the theory of E.O. Wilson, that “there once had been a covenant between animals and men” but now it had been broken (*Solar* 35). She learns that “the division between humans and animals was a false one. There were times, even recent times, when they both spoke the same language” (*Solar* 81-82). Her journey of learning allows her to hear nature: “I thought I heard the voices of the world, of what was all around us—the stones, the waters flowing toward their ends, the osprey with its claws in fish, even the minnows and spawn. I heard trees with their roots holding ground” (*Solar* 181). Similarly, the protagonist of the novel *Power*, Omishto, also comments on the unnecessary interference of words and that through silence, one can “survive and be friends with this land” (*Power* 19) and learn to understand the language of nature: “words are such noisy things and silence is something you have to listen to and when you do, it takes you by the hand, it catches hold of you. It tells you how to know things, like how sounds travel, where a certain bird is calling from” (*Power* 19). Finally Angela comes to the conclusion, that if the barrier of language were removed, the truth would emerge:

I began to feel that if we had no separate words for inside and out and there were no boundaries between them, no walls, no sky, you would see me. What would meet your eyes would not be the mask of what had happened to me, not the evidence of violence, not even how I closed the doors to the rooms of anger and fear. Some days you would see fire; other days, water. Or earth. You would see how I am like the night sky with its stars that fall through time and space and arrive here as wolves and fish and people, all of us fed by them... (*Solar* 54)

In these examples we can observe that different species are individualized and have the capacity to act, merely by their doing/being in the world. The human characters take on an open stance of listening. Likewise, these passages render human-rational language as unessential, allowing for other forms of communication



that may well be more accurate. For instance, in Hogan's *Mean Spirit* one reads that Lila Blanket "was a listener to the voice of water, a woman who interpreted the river's story for her people. A river never lied. Unlike humans, it had no need to distort the truth, and she heard the river's voice unfolding like its water across the earth" (5).

Furthermore, these examples also highlight a third counter-hegemonic strategy, that of reversing popular perception. By stressing the elimination of language, the protagonists are able to hear nature, thus granting agency to nature and undercutting the boundary between human and non-human, arguing against the hyper-separation that Plumwood describes. Nature ceases to be passive, an object and is awarded subjecthood. In many instances of Hogan's novels, nature is quoted to be observing humans. In our culture, it is always humans observing the other, nature; humans studying nature either as scientists or viewing TV documentaries, animals in zoos or reading maps and interpreting the land. John Berger denounces that when our "imperial" eye observes the non-human, we are exercising our power over nature (14). We fail to acknowledge that nature has the power to observe us, and thus, deny it any agency. These literary texts force that perception upon the reader. For example, Angela arrives by ferry to Adam's Rib and sees that "the pale trunks of birch trees stood straight; I was certain the dark eyes on their trunks looked at me" (*Solar* 22). Similarly, Omishto, as she enters the swamp "feels watched. By nature, I think now. It's what I felt watching me, all along. It knows us. It watched us. The animals have eyes that see us. The birds, the trees, everything knows what we do" (*Power* 59). In the swamp, after the hurricane, Ama (Omishto's aunt and guide) tracks the panther, a totemic animal for the fictitious Taiga tribe of the novel. Here the agency of the cat is clearly acknowledged by Omishto who observes that "The cat looks back at us. It doesn't run. In the darkness its eyes shine and this is what I see. Eyes. It seems to look right through us. It sees through us. Then, at ease, as if certain we will follow, it moves slowly away. It is calling us forward... That eyeshine is its testimony. Its voice, its words" (*Power* 64). As Ama goes forward, she calls Omishto and the "cat looks up and she shows me to the cat, and what she does is, she introduces me to it, it to me. She says my name as she looks at me, as if I am both an offering and a friend" (*Power* 65). In this passage, the cat is treated as experientially equal and capable of a reciprocal relationship. The panther is neither homogenized nor instrumentalized. Omishto, guided by Ama, who "keeps up relations... with nature and the spirit world" (17), learns to hear the earth and consider it with an ethics of care: "they come to me with their sounds, their wordless voices, their needs, the water, the trees, the animals" (228). The fact that Hogan, repeatedly in her fiction, represents nature as observing humans is a radical departure from the dominant politics of representation which confers agency and voice only to the human viewer. If we allow animals and plants to return our gaze, then we acknowledge their agency and subjecthood, becoming aware of our likenesses and differences, precisely the strategy which Plumwood defends (137).

These literary examples also abound in alternative ways of attaining knowledge. They do not reject rationalism and science; however, they also accept alternative ways, a fourth counter-hegemonic strategy. Wilson and his followers trace the

vestiges of biophilia, concluding that they remain stronger in indigenous communities where knowledge is not just ratiocination but can also be derived from alternative ways of knowing, reaching the same conclusions as scientific knowledge (Nelson 203). Linda Hogan, in her preface to *Dwellings: A Spiritual History of the Living World* states as the purpose of her collection of essays to “search out a world of different knowings,” through connectedness to nature, based on “lessons learned from the land” (12). Hogan maintains that by listening to nature, we can arrive at the same knowledge as that achieved by science and intellect (19). Echoing Mircea Eliade who affirmed the importance of “learning the language of animals” (98), Hogan recalls that healers in the Native American tradition were called interpreters because they were the ones able to “hear the world and pass its wisdom along” (50). So she, in a manner consistent with the biophilia hypothesis, recalls that not only indigenous people and those who have continued to live in traditional societies are able to hear the “voices of earth but that time ago, the same attitude reigned in Western society, now relegated to the territory of myth (50-51). Hogan, much as theorists Wilson and Mathews, considers myth, not as falsehood, but a “high form of truth” (51). They all accept, as Plumwood, that our culture often insists on an excessive intellectualism, privileging the mind over matter and rejecting material sources of knowledge.

This return to alternative ways of knowing is developed by Mathews, who stresses the unity of mind and matter. *Solar Storms* provides us with excellent examples. In this novel, Angela, together with the three other women, Dora-Rouge who is around one hundred years old, Agnes and Bush, undertake a trip north to the construction site of the dams in Canada and to where Dora’s people used to live. The trip not only requires all their strength and ingenuity but it is also a mythic journey connecting Angela to the land and her tribal heritage. During their canoe trip, they find, as a consequence of the James Bay Hydroelectric Project “flooded and drowned” rivers and “other places, once filled with water, [now] were dry” and age old islands which had disappeared” (*Solar* 205). They have to learn to “read” the signs of nature, for maps are totally useless since the “land refused to be shaped by the makers of maps. Land had its own will” (*Solar* 123). The women need to take into account the “mischief and trickiness” of the “defiant land” (123). Our culture’s imposition on and instrumentalization of nature, viewing it according to our own prejudices, is made patent as the women realize that maps “were only as accurate as the minds of their makers and those had been men possessed with the spoils of this land” (122). This text also provides an example of how the perception of the map makers (the center) of the other (the land) creates its own reality (the maps which do not fit the terrain), thus confirming the inaccurate view of the center. In the end, the women have to throw away the maps, open themselves up to contingency and alternative ways of knowing, reconnecting mind and body. They learn to rely on Dora-Rouge’s “cell-deep memory,” a trail her body remembers and one which Angela also sees in dreams: “I’d dreamed them, lakes clear as glass, lakes that were black water and rocked against land, sure as tributaries of my own blood” (137). She sees the trail “as if it were inside me already, the future, alongside a memory of place, people, and even hardship” (137). Here, rational knowledge is eschewed in favor of



other ways of knowing. Angela learns to recover her biophilic learning and to reconnect to the earth. She learns that

there was a place inside the human that spoke with the land, that entered dreaming, in the way that people in the north found directions in their dreams. They dreamed charts of land and currents of water. They dreamed where food animals lived. These dreams they called hunger maps and when they followed those maps, they found their prey. It was the language animals and humans had in common. People found their cures in the same way (*Solar* 170).

And finally a fifth counter-hegemonic strategy, one which emphasizes the subjecthood of earth others, is literature's ability to give voice to those who do not have it. Giving voice to nature presents a thorny ethical issue, as the mere expression "give voice" implies that we (humans, writers) have the power to "give" that voice. Philosopher Val Plumwood argues that any representation of animal voices or intentions always implies a translation and an interpretation into our cultural and linguistic paradigms, in the same manner of translations from one language and culture into another. She claims that representing animal communication may be difficult but not impossible (58-59). The difficulty, as we have seen, lies in Western cultural paradigms which have privileged rationalism to the extent that it has been used as the measuring stick to hyper-separate humans from the other-than-human-world and in this case, narrowing meaningful communication exclusively to language. However, humans are not the only ones on earth with agency or the capacity to communicate. Donna Haraway also addresses this by pointing out that "in a sociological account of science all sorts of things are actors, only some of which are human language-bearing actors, and that you have to include, as sociological actors, all kinds of heterogeneous entities[...]. This imperative helps to break down the notion that only language-bearing actors have a kind of agency" ("Cyborgs" 5). Many ontological theories of environmental ethics state that humans must acknowledge that they are "interest carriers" any time that they try to attribute subject status to animals or "inanimate" entities such as rocks or rivers. Yet, we as humans make sense of things through words, and as such, in order to understand the non-human, we need words. Literature and that "empathizing imagination" might be one more way to attempt to understand and make sense of our relationships in and with the world: as Malamud states, literature has the potential to present a "valuable (if not complete and flawless) account of what it is like to be a different animal from ourselves" (7). Ecocritic Patrick Murphy claims that for those creatures and entities that do not speak human languages, we must rely on humans to give them a voice and "depict their subject positions in opposition to their objectification by others" (24). The test of how accurate those renderings are needs to be based on the "actions that they call on humans to perform in the world. The voicing is directed at us as agents-in-the-world" (24). Malamud proposes a specific aesthetic ethic that centers animals in our discourse and advances an advocacy methodology (43), much like what Murphy suggests. Political theorist David Schlosberg, in discussing eco-justice, recognizes the need for humans to articulate a voice in the name of nature,





much as the case when advocates or lawyers are used to represent the needs of those unable to do so directly (such as minors or the mentally challenged, always bearing in mind the needs of those represented) (65). Writer Ursula LeGuin also addresses this issue of rendering the natural world as a speaking subject, and she remarks that “very often the re-visioning consists in a “simple” change of point of view” (75).

This shift of perception, a common literary strategy, is made patent in the science fiction *Xenogenesis* series by Octavia Butler. In the first novel, *Dawn*, protagonist Lilith, rescued by aliens from a nuclear disaster, discovers that the aliens have cured her cancer and made her stronger. However, she feels angry because “This was one more thing they had done to her body without her consent and supposedly for her own good. ‘We used to treat animals that way,’ she muttered bitterly” (*Dawn* 31). By comparing what is being done to her with the way we treat animals, the reader is invited to see the other side and think. Another example could be LeGuin’s “The Wife’s Story” where we find an example of a shift, of “stepping into the shoes of the other.” The wife complains that her husband has changed, returning late and smelling strange. Their children begin to fear their father, so the wife follows him one night:

I saw the changing. In his feet, it was, first. They got long, each foot got longer, stretching out and the foot getting long, and fleshy, and white. And no hair on them.

The hair begun to come away all over his body. [...] And he turned his face. It was changing while I looked. It got flatter and flatter, the mouth was flat and wide, and the teeth grinning flat and dull, [...]

He stood up then on two legs.

I saw him. I had to see him, my own dear love, turned into the hateful one.

I couldn’t move, [...] burst out into a crazy, awful howling, a grief howl and a terror howl and a calling howl. (81)

This story reverses the myth of the werewolf, forcing the reader to empathize with the she-wolf whose “husband” transforms into a man. The story makes the reader question all the horror tales about human transformation into animals, and consider that the reverse perspective might be equally horrendous to non-human others.

Another example can be found in Aurora Levins Morales’ co-authored autobiography *Getting Home Alive*. In a section titled “Distress Signals” she begins by copying a report from Reuters on the unexplained massing of dolphins in Japan in 1974-75 and the beached whales in Australia in 1985 and then makes her creative comment, giving voice to the animals by taking their point of view and addressing humans:

I flounder, I beach, I drive myself forward, but the ocean is behind me, not ahead. They think we don’t understand this, that we are dumb beasts. The small two-legged upright shapes standing outlined against the light of the sky make noises of worry[...]. We have come here on purpose: to die, to lay our bodies in front of your noses, to rot in your sight. *The sea, the sea is dying.*” (66)



In this fragment we can see this repositioning: the authorial persona takes the point of view of the dolphins and whales and speaks to the humans on the beach, as agents-in-the-world. She recognizes the agency of the animals by implying that the dolphins massed around Iki Island to prevent fishermen from leaving the coast, as the result of their killing hundreds of dolphins entangled in their nets, and she clearly voices that the whales have chosen to commit suicide. Her accuracy in the voicing is tested by the reactions of the animals, which are forced to act as they lack a human language, but their actions are in reality, much more eloquent than any words. Morales, with her empathizing imagination, translates and interprets the actions of the whales in terms that humans can understand. As Malamud suggests, the aesthetic ethics requires that a human and humane response to a “cultural encounter of any kind involving animal subjects, is the development of the consciousness that [humans], as a species, have behaved badly, inexcusably, toward our fellow creatures” (43). As their agents-in-the-world we need to accord non-humans respect and “develop a deeper sense of their integrity, their wisdom and importance on their own terms—not as judged by the criteria of human utility or aesthetics” (43). This is the ethics of care that ecofeminists Plumwood and Karen Warren advocate.

All these literary texts dramatize a continuous process of mutual discovery between human and non-human characters. Non-human others are acknowledged as sentient beings with a degree of agency, while humans learn to be open to listening, to communicating with their earth others and awarding them reciprocal respect. In these examples, non-humans are no longer backgrounded or instrumentalized. By acknowledging their own identities, needs and potential, their subjecthood is made patent, albeit, translated into our cultural paradigm and thus they are made deserving of ethical consideration. Although the representation may be flawed at times, it certainly brings us closer to understanding what it might be like to be an earth other. The fact that the protagonists of these novels show concern and respect for the non-human other also reinforces positively an ethics of care. In doing so these literary texts exercise counter-hegemonic strategies which help dissolve the false dichotomies which our dualistic thinking has created. Moreover, these strategies allow human beings to recall our ecological embeddedness. Randy Malamud states that literature should “initiate and inspire the *beginning* of an imaginative consideration and reformulation of who these animals are and how we share the world” (emphasis in original 34). These literary texts provoke that reformulation of what our relationship to earth others should be, giving nature an ethical consideration. They re-situate humans in the biosphere and re-animate nature, providing readers with an adequate ethical response to the non-human world.



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