

Towards a New Ecological Discourse: *Translating Knowledge into Agency*

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Abstract:

Stimulating effective communication between activists and scholars of various disciplines of study to combat climate crises, and directing the effort towards minimizing the gap between *theory* and *praxis* is the theme of this article. I list some ways in which literature and linguistics can provide tools for better communication and dissemination of knowledge. Based on how the opinion is molded and narratives shifted by the centers of power, the article recommends radical changes in our worldview as a first step to affect a much-needed shift in thinking and action.

Keywords: agency, ecology, communication, hegemony, media, rethinking theory.

Introduction

Environmental scholars and activists centered in and around the field of literature have always been looking to expand and increase the purview of their literary, critical, political and social concerns. Environmental humanities as a discipline bridges the distance between humanities and other subjects of study as well as the whole of academia and the general public. The focus now is to meet the ecological challenge proactively and to come up with solutions and policy suggestions in co-operation with natural sciences and all available wisdom.

Speaking about action on climate change, Hans Joachim Schellnhuber, an atmospheric physicist and climatologist observed in 2009 that “social scientists” had to do more heavy lifting when it came to climate change. “Speaking as a natural scientist,”

he said, “I think 90% of research [on global change] will have to be done by the social scientists.” (Peterson)

Climate denialism and lukewarm approach to radical policy adoption by governments have a host of reasons, ranging from poor communication, cognitive biases, to conflicts of interests in the political-industrial complex. It is not for the lack of enthusiasm or rigorous research on the part of the members of the communities of our natural sciences. Researchers spend days and weeks in the most inhospitable parts of the world to collect data and come up with policy recommendations. It would be a redemption for their hard work too, if our governments instead of denying or shrugging responsibility would work to counter this existential threat. Apart from the denial based on scientific data and inefficiency, which can easily be addressed, the more pernicious are denials based on cognitive biases, failure to comprehend the massive scale of issues, tribal allegiances, and misinformation campaigns powered by multi-billion-dollar fossil fuel industry which keeps producing the so-called set of “alternative facts”. Though in our current models of flawed democracies, large parts of the ruling elite are complicit in the political-industrial complex, political will can be influenced if the related science is efficiently and accurately disseminated through forms of media, school and college curricula and injected into the dialogues in public spaces. It is imperative to concentrate on two aspects, on increasing efficiency in communication, and on tackling the constantly evolving obscurantism of the mainstream media on the climate change issue.

An epochal shift occurred during the seventeenth century along with the advent of technology and the ensuing massive project of industrialization. From a worldview with the earth as a goddess and powerful nurturer, this project gave way to a psyche that was over-zealous and confident in the domination of the natural world. The arrival of Europeans on the North American shores was the beginning of a new epoch in all of modern history and a prime example of this thirst for domination and colonization, culminating in the modern industrialized state. This epoch was marked by a predominantly passive nature imagery totally dominated by machine culture.

Today, we have the scientific knowledge and the means to prevent further degradation, but we do not seem to have the “political” will to do so. Part of the paper

will discuss this gap between theory and practice, or *knowledge* and *agency* and why this gap has prevailed in face of so much scientific evidence and call for radical action.

The first part will emphasize the tools and concepts that humanities can bring into this dynamic to assist in averting further degradation of our ecology and in the process, prevent global scale natural disasters and pandemics.

1. Coming into “contact”

Contact here emphasizes the meeting, or rather collision, in most cases, of two different worlds. The moment of contact is the moment before the transformation, before the human and the *wild* acquire new characteristics. The word here precisely invokes Henry Thoreau's reaction on arriving at the inhospitable peak of Mount Ktaadn. “Think of our life in nature,” he writes, “contact with it,—rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! The *solid* earth! The *actual* world! The common sense! *Contact! Contact! Who* are we? *Where* are we?” (Thoreau 133). So is expressed the precious moment of liminality in the famous Thoreau passage. The “contact” of the title of this section refers to the following three kinds of contact.

1. 1 Human contact with nature

This emphasizes human reaction upon their contact with wilderness. The contact can either elicit an exploitative utilitarian response or a response of reverential stewardship. *Stewardship* seems to be the natural response, as in the case of all indigenous groups across the globe. This is the instinctive response and it has stood the test of time. It is a symbiotic relationship with nature that benefited and has sustained the ancient tribes to this day. To this day, tribes which have not made contact with our so-called “civilization”, exist. Their way of life has not changed in centuries. These tribes are self-sufficient and happy and do not need the intrusion of modern technology in their midst.

The second and a more reactive response fueled by fear and prejudice, as in the case of the settlers who arrived on the North American shores from Europe is that of rapid clearing out the wilderness. There were multiple reasons for this but it devolved

gradually into rampant greed without care for the *life* of the wilderness. Carolyn Merchant has called it an epochal time when human culture largely shifted its views of nature and in a paradigm shift made the “taming” of nature through machines its motto, accomplishing two tasks, the destruction of the wilderness inspired by negative connotations adopted from the Judaeo-Christian worldview, and the rampant acquisition of property and capital for personal gain, fueled by greed and a total lack of conscience.

Edward Abbey, evokes the sentiments of Charles Marion Russell, the “cowboy artist”, from *One Man’s Montana* (1964):

I have been called a pioneer. In my book a pioneer is a man who comes to virgin country, traps off all the fur, kills off all the wild meat, cuts down all the trees, grazes off all the grass, plows the roots up and strings ten million miles of wire. A pioneer destroys things and calls it civilization. (Abbey 398)

1. 2 Contact with other disciplines in the academia

Being an inherently multidisciplinary subject of study and exploration, a multitude of questions are raised while reading, traversing disciplines and comprehending concepts and events. *Language*, as a medium need to facilitate the translation, comprehension and meaning-making. It also is the only tool to convey knowledge and message to the general public. Thus, linguistics and literature’s pride of place in environmental humanities.

1. 3 Contact with wildlife

This is an unavoidable part of encountering wilderness. Lately, this issue that environmental humanists and ecological activists who advocate for the rights of wildlife, have always held paramount has become a topic of discussion. Contact with wildlife has been brought to the mainstream because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Sonia Shah, the author of the book *Pandemic* (2020) explains how looking for shelter and a new habitat, animals come in contact with us: “All of these things (viruses and other pathogens) are coming out of wildlife and animals. All of these microbes live in animals and wildlife and are harmless in those environments. So, we think of them as

invading us, but what's really happening is we're invading their territory. So, when we invade wildlife habitat, we destroy where the bats roost." (Shah) This is a prime and a very contemporary example of contact with wildlife that we can readily identify with since we are all struck by this disaster called the Covid-19 pandemic. But we seldom care to bother when we kill millions of animals each year by encroaching into their homes and their territory in the name of development and civilization.

If we take these not so subtle cues that the ecosystem is giving us (in the form of pathogens), in a positive proactive manner by *listening* to nature, we can probably begin to expect to avert many disasters and to live in harmony with all other life forms.

2. Communication

Humanities fused with science empirically impacts the interest of young students in the study of science and technology. With narratives in literature that could arouse interest in science and technology and make it look simpler, "science would become accessible to students who think they aren't interested in science," writes Ellen Szabo, the author of *Saving the World One Word at a Time: Writing Cli-Fi* (2015).

One of the main problems facing students and activists centered in literature while communicating with other disciplines is the issue of language. Students of literature are trained in critical thinking and interconnection of the "non-existent dots". Literature and linguistic disciplines can help in the following ways.

2. 1 Design and *re-figuring* of theoretical categories

An effective example can be that of the contemporary ecofeminist theory which thrives within its own ecosystem of a "series of stories and a number of theories", according to Marti Kheel, as opposed to mega theories structured towards solving all problems of ecological crisis. This community of theorists and activists soundly rejects the theorizing from the mostly male voices coming from the existing patriarchal ecocritical field. Marti Kheel says that the "emphasis has been not on developing razor-sharp theories that can be used to dictate future conduct, but rather on painting a

'landscape' (or 'mindscape') of the world." (Kheel 1993) The emphasis is placed on the production of more "emotive ethics" through multiple stories and smaller scattered theories. The aim seems to be to elevate the human capacity to empathize, and move them to action.

For example, the novel by Malayalam writer Sarah Joseph, *Gift in Green* (2011), narrates the story of the transformation of an idyllic village into a toxic landfill. The desolation and suffering that follows when analysed through Marti Kheel's "holistic ethics" paradigm presents a landscape or mindscape which is emotionally accessible and relatable. By virtue of it being an identifiable case, it elicits and accesses emotions in its readers, and has a strong call for action embedded in it.

2. 2 **Through the study of signs, symbols, and strategies used in media**

Through the semiotical study of tactics that media adopts to obstruct real issues, social sciences in conjunction with scholars of literature and semiotics can employ strategies to clear the smokescreen, uncover the deceits and lies spewed forth by media and lawmakers.

A recent study on the media presentation of the newly proposed Green New Deal¹ in the United States was found to be totally focused on the players and their political careers and on sensationalizing the issue to increase TRP. Kathleen Hall Jamieson calls it "tactical framing". Evidently the backers and financiers of mainstream media, inclined to their own political and financial gains are at the root of this deceitful presentation, whereby most Americans and outsiders do not know the details of the Green New Deal. A survey of newspaper articles and prime time television proves that the hosts and news

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anchors and reporters never discussed the detailed proposal in the mainstream media. A very important legislation which cannot be passed unless there is grassroots-level awareness, it is shrouded in mischaracterizations, fear-mongering, and conspiracies. To put pressure on the local representatives to force political will, proper dissemination of details to the general public and especially young people about the Green New Deal is essential. If passed by the US Congress, the country with the highest per capita carbon output will adopt a zero-emissions policy, inspiring the whole world, and moving in a positive direction.

In her book *The Spiral of Cynicism* (1997), Kathleen Hall Jamieson, referring to tactical framing, writes that “the cynicism lingers even after the framing is gone.” Jamieson asks us to reflect on when was it that we heard or saw or read a full description of what the Green New Deal is and how it is being planned to be implemented. The answer to which is “probably never”, since most of us do not get out of our news and social media bubbles.

Linguistics and literature can help us address this issue. Language is the only tool which is going to accomplish two tasks, which is securing people’s confidence so that the authors of Green New Deal have the support, and the drafting of the full proposal. It requires an empathetic rhetoric to convey to the general public the aftermath of the adoption of the Green New Deal, which would be about the guarantee of job security and unemployment benefits. This is a policy proposal in the context of the United States but policies like these need to be adopted immediately in countries of like India and China.

2. 3 Providing meaning through “close reading”

Finally, the humanities by “close reading(s)” provide new meanings to every media, art and popular culture representations. A closer reading of popular culture exposes minor features, hidden particularities of other social science disciplines, and even in the study of pure sciences. Sustainability messages can remain hidden and the voices of marginalized categories, and need to be unveiled and heard in the mainstream. The tools of humanities, specially literature and semiotics are well suited and effective at this. Individuality is given a new life through this and democratic values stand a chance to

prevail. Close reading can parse out the voices and suffering of the human and the non-human.

3. Reconceptualization and Reorganization

We need an environmental humanity that re-conceptualizes our relationship to nature and the world in order to transform our worldview.

Our upbringing, and our society and culture are responsible in forming our relationship with the components of the world outside, animals, nature as well as people. This starts when we are small children, through stories of all kinds, religious stories, animal fables, recounting of personal experiences by elders, etc. The ecological crises that we find ourselves in today can all be traced back to the stories and fables and myths of humanity. This is why we find differences in the relationships of a tribe that lives in complete harmony with the wilderness, and the Western ethos of “taming” and dominating nature and harvesting capital gain till the last drop. This is why we find that in the Indian subcontinent till the recent decades, there was a kind of reverence and love for nature and the pastoral ideal; until it has all but waned, influenced by the American style of industrial consumerism, which sees nothing but “capital”, alienating ourselves more and more, from nature, as well as ourselves. To the extent that we now talk of the whole world in the same breath. *Everywhere* seems the same.

We need to reread the old myths and fables and unlearn a huge amount of lies and propaganda that has been taught and fed to us. Proprieties of topic and space prevent us from including the details in this essay, and what’s more it would be a digression. But we can start with questioning ourselves, when we started to believe that earning capital, being wealthy was the only mark of success. We can start with reconnecting with nature by observing how the children do it, by recalling how we did it once. As Maria Montessori put it, “A child more than anyone else, is a spontaneous observer of nature.” We can start with questioning all the propaganda and news stories that flood the media and social media. We can start by clearing our brains of all the information that we do not require and which keep us from thinking and acting on urgent issues. And we can trust in our empathy with the natural world and create new stories, and fables and pass them to

the younger generation. This small step perhaps would change their young minds to think for themselves and for the animals and nature around them. This would go a long way in conservation and prevention of future global disasters.

3. Future Positive Stewardship

The extension of morality to the non-human world is a new concept forwarded by ecological activists who voice concerns of animal liberation. Aymeric Caron in *Inter-Species* (2016) argues that humanity has always progressed in extending its realm of moral consideration to groups that were previously held inferior; people that hitherto had been described as barbarians or savages. These also include groups that we have enslaved and keep discriminating against, such as women and homosexuals, etc.

An understanding and discovery of various indigenous cultures have unraveled the system of stewardship of nature and it could be something to learn from.

In the Eastern Himalayas, Nepal's government handed over the responsibility of management of wildlife and the forest around the hills of Mt. Kunchenjunga to the local communities, who had been living there for hundreds of years in excellent harmony with the nature. The local coalition of communities works in close collaboration with the UN under the Sacred Himalayan Landscape program.² This is an important step and a model that could prove beneficial for many such unique areas of biodiversity in India. Whereas a capitalistic, authoritarian approach could have decimated the biodiversity and the rich cultural heritage of people within years, now it has transformed into a sustainable model of survival for the locals by handing over the *stewardship* of nature to them.

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The Sacred Himalayan Landscape is a 39,021 sq kilometer (15,066 sq mi) large trans-boundary landscape in the eastern Himalayas encompassing temperate broadleaf and conifer forests, alpine meadows and grasslands, which harbor more than 80 mammal and more than 440 bird species. It extends from Nepal's Langtang National Park through Sikkim and Darjeeling in India to western Bhutan's Torsa Strict Nature Reserve. More than 73% of this landscape is located in Nepal, including Sagarmatha National Park, Makalu Barun National Park, and Kanchenjunga Conservation Area.- *Wikipedia*

Human conflict and unwanted contact with wildlife has decreased along with the poaching in the area and so has the illegal harvesting of valuable medicinal plants.

Another example of going back to indigenous stewardship is the Laguna Peubla Native American Nation in South Western United States, rich in Native American tribal reservations and population. The tribes believe in equally respecting all species, a practice which results in the effective management of the forests on which they depend on. The tribes consider some animals, like the deer central to their topography and existence, others like the spotted owl they associate with misfortune and disease, but understand the equal worth of both in the balance of the ecosystem. Surprisingly, Serra J. Hoagland observes that the techniques that the modern professionals of wildlife bring with them, these tribes have known all along through many generations. (Hoagland, 2020)

World Wildlife Fund is working with the Native tribes of Alaska to protect their ecosystem, their water and their wildlife. It has been more than a century since John Muir, who made numerous journeys to Alaska over a century ago, and found out that the commercial methods of hunting and fishing were not sustainable for the Native tribes of Alaska. He records in his book the devastation wrought on the Native villages by the introduction of technology like guns as early as the 1890s to 1910s.

Muir records that a population of around 1500 had shrunk to about its third portion, with some seven to eight villages completely decimated on this Alaskan island. This, he adds was because of the imbalance caused by technology, especially guns. The traditional skills of the native people which had kept them alive till that day had rapidly faded to the extent that they could not survive without the use of modern guns for hunting. Guns had started an unhealthy competition among the tribes; they had started killing the animals without restraint. So, both over-hunting and commercial hunting by the white hunters as well as the disappearing skill sets of the native hunters had been the reason of resource loss, starvation and mass deaths.

Muir writes,

About two hundred perished here, and unless some aid be extended by our government which claims these people, in a few years at most every soul of them will have vanished from the face of the earth; for, even where alcohol is left out of the count, the few articles of food, clothing, guns, etc., furnished by the traders, exert a degrading influence, making them less self-reliant, and less and less skillful as hunters. They seem easily susceptible of civilization, and well deserve the attention of our government. (Muir 5)

In coalition with the native tribes and following their principles and art of stewardship, an Arctic Fishery Management Plan has been created to close all potential commercial farming of fishes which would stop the Arctic regions to be harvested according to modern industrial commercial patterns. According to the North Pacific Fishery Management Council,

This management policy recognizes the need to balance competing uses of marine resources and different social and economic goals for sustainable fishery management, including protection of the long-term health of the ecosystem and the optimization of yield from its fish resources. This policy recognizes the complex interactions among ecosystem components, and seeks to protect important species. (“Arctic Fishery Management – North Pacific Fishery Management Council,” n.d.)

4. Addressing the real virus

Scientists are of the opinion that the rate the human race will encounter deadly viruses and natural disasters like wildfires, cyclones, floods, droughts, etc is only going to increase. Most pathogenic diseases in the latter half of the twentieth century have their origin in wildlife. They have been carried to human populations by micro-organisms from animals after we came in contact by encroaching on their territories. And this is not an act of active invasion, but a tragic result of coming into undesirable contact. Deforestation, rampant urbanization, poaching and illegal animal trade are all activities which come back to harm us in this way. The wilderness thus needs to be protected not

just for our causes of aesthetics, politics or recreational value but also as the only home of animals who do not want to come into contact with us but have been compelled to.

We are not going to hear about the protection of wilderness and the rights of wildlife and nature in the monstrous mainstream media which dominates and moulds the opinion of billions of human beings. They are not going to advocate for the dire need to adopt a proactive and an urgent model of alternate energy policy geared towards zero emissions. This is because the discourse is set up in a way that it shifts the attention away from these dire topics and hypnotizes the general public like a snake-charmer does a dancing cobra. So, we hear about the leaps and bounds in anti-viral research or propaganda about climate change being a hoax and how the Green New Deal or anything resembling is a “loony socialist pipe dream.” The interconnection of these issues is startling. Remembering that it is the 1% of the total world population that guide and dictate the media and only that percentage of people enjoy wealth and power like that can help us comprehend this model of profit and capitalism. The same people who destroy the ecosystem and our planet by profiting from fossil fuel are the same people who own multi-billion-dollar media houses. These are the same people who influence and lobby lawmakers and legislators for political favors, and profit from sales of anti-viral medicines. So why would they let this narrative seep into the general discourse by letting it be aired on their own news channels or their own mouth pieces that are the lawmakers?

Conclusion

By definition a multidisciplinary field, environmental humanities have always been enriched by alliances with the natural sciences, social sciences and various areas of the humanities. It in turn contributes to them in all these different ways. Literature through legends, myths, parables and allegories educate people, form their psyche and inspire them to translate their passive appreciation and angst to activism, leading to change in their physical world.

Michael Cronin, commenting on this translation of passivity says that departments in universities and colleges, translation and study circles need to start making the issue of climate change more relatable and more relevant to their immediate communities. The

present Covid-19 pandemic has taken on an unprecedented shape and uncovered the dangers of inter-species interactions. One of the important branches of literature which is translation studies has recently been focusing on inter-species translation or communication. Just like Henry David Thoreau's advice made nearly two centuries ago for us to start listening to nature in various ways, there is a point to be made that the sooner we start to understand and communicate with the thousands of species which we share the planet with, the better for us and our planet. This can be effectively done by studying our stories, poems, and songs about animals and nature. Indigenous cultures are treasure troves of inter-species communication and they can teach us about the responsibilities of each species and increase empathy, thereby making us more ecologically conscious and responsible.

This area of immense potential and an equally matched proportion of challenge is the conversion or *translation of knowledge into agency*. A plethora of natural sciences, individually and in conjunction with others have provided us with the specificities of ecological challenges that humanity is faced with. They also prescribe solutions. What needs to be addressed is the distance that separates knowledge and agency. Branches of humanities, university departments, schools and colleges, study circles must mobilize around the ecological question and devise methods of effective communication to various groups of people on how to make the problem of ecological crises more relatable and relevant to the lives of men. This is imperative for immediate radical action.

Notes:

1. The Green New Deal, hearkening back to President Roosevelt's "New Deal" which was a series of programs, public work projects, financial reforms, and regulations in the United States between 1933 and 1939, is an ambitious plan proposed in the United States Congress by congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio Cortez and Senator Ed Markey, with various others, for the US to transition into a zero-emissions economy and address the twin evils of climate change and wealth inequality. The Green New Deal combines Roosevelt's economic approach with

- modern ideas such as renewable energy and resource efficiency. (Ocasio-Cortez 2019, 1)
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