

Xerophilia: Ecocritical Explorations in Southwestern Literature

Tom Lynch
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Reviewed by Noelene Kelly¹

"Xerophilia", Tom Lynch tells us, is the love of desert places. Having lived in, walked, written about and photographed much of the Sonoran and Chihuahuan Deserts over many years, Lynch is himself, an admitted xerophile. His aim in this monograph is to explore how writers from the Southwestern desert region of the United States – those "community storytellers" as he calls them – are helping to create "an affective bond" between the residents of this region and the "place in which they dwell". As he says, he wants to contribute to the evolution of a "sustainable xerophilic culture in these arid bioregions".

Drawing on a body of literature that represents a "counter-tradition" to conventional writing about the American frontier and the "taming" of the west, Lynch considers how Native American, Hispano and Chicano communities – and even those Anglos who have, like himself, grown into deep connection with these lands – may preserve cultural and ecological integrity in the face of increasing social, political and environmental pressures. One important means by which this may happen is, he claims, by paying attention to the literature these communities and these places produce.

While a few well-known authors such as Ed Abbey, Terry Tempest Williams and Leslie Marmon Silko pepper Lynch's scholarly discussion and analysis, the bulk of his consideration is focused on the work of lesser known authors such as Jimmy Santiago Baca, Gary Nabhan, Ray Gonzalez, Frank Waters and Susan Tweit, who speak from diverse, multicultural perspectives and in a range of styles and genres. Through his analysis of these works, and through the inclusion here and there of his own photographs, nature writing riffs and engaging personal narratives, we find ourselves in the presence of a range of artists and thinkers who are deeply sensitive to their surroundings. The added bonus of some hard science, along with segments of relevant cultural and environmental history, contributes to the rich texture of this study.

Xerophilia is structured into two broad sections. The first two chapters deal with locally important political and social justice issues around water, land use, and place identity in the upper reaches of the Rio Grande watershed in northern New Mexico and in the regions segmented by the US–Mexico border. The latter half of the book explores different forms of perception, demonstrating how bioregional literature foregrounds those species and places that tend to be overlooked in other literatures, and how its accent on a multisensory rather than a purely visual "ecological aesthetic" suggests a means by which our "home" places may be more deeply apprehended and experienced.

In these beautifully weighted discussions Lynch demonstrates to what good effect the political and aesthetic dimensions of ecocriticism can be interwoven and mobilised to contest the very real damage visited on the Southwest deserts by such things as All Terrain Vehicles, gun ranges and the proliferation of swimming pools and golf courses. Through his artistic awareness as much as through his scholarly analysis Lynch enables us to hear the voices of these local authors as an assemblage of resistance to all the forces that would deplete these deserts and their traditional peoples. We also gain a strong sense of why these lands – "painted", wounded, "bad" and beautiful as they may be – conjure in those who know them such deep identification and such love. The xerophilic stories that emerge from such deep engagement with place are, Lynch

reminds us, pathways by which we may reclaim our own “interfusion” with the world and by which we may consider alternative responses to the environmental problems that face us all.

While a number of previous studies have considered the distinctive quality and efficacy of the literature of the Southwest – Scott Slovic’s edited collection *Getting Over the Color Green* (2001) and Audrey Goodman’s *Translating Western Landscapes* (2002) come to mind – few have done so with such an unapologetic bioregional emphasis. At a time when ecocritical discourse is both challenged and emboldened to recast “sense of place” considerations within a planetary context, Lynch both resists and at times decries the impulse towards a “universal reading” of texts. This in my view is both a courageous and a wise move, as it reminds us of the “vital function” performed by bioregional literature in struggling for environmental and social justice from a position of “particularized storied residence in a specific landscape”.

That said, however, one of the great strengths of *Xerophilia* is its “overlapping and permeable borders”. Like bioregionalism itself, the texts and the places that are examined here are “nested” realities, “interwoven at various scales from the most local to the planetary”. In depicting conflicts over water in New Mexico and the so-called “illegal” movement of people across national borders, these texts enable us to view these issues “from the ground”, but they also remind us that similar scenarios are being played out with commensurate degrees of volatility in many parts of the world, and certainly in Australia. In a similar way Lynch’s conflation of the crash in pollination rates in the Sonoran Desert with the chronic tendency in Anglo populations to overlook, or to represent as “monstrous”, most species of invertebrates, gives us striking new insights into the “pollination crisis” that is currently sweeping North America and threatening to go global. As Lynch comments – and he is right I think – in renewing our sensory awareness so that the previously imperceptible becomes perceptible, bioregional texts not only enhance our literature, but enrich our ethical and emotional connections to other-than-human beings. Such literature helps, thereby, to “stave off the extinction crisis we face”.

Xerophilia is an original and accomplished work of ecologically oriented literary criticism. Winner of the 2009 Thomas J. Lyon Award, it affirms the significance of regional literature and forges new possibilities for the genre of the critical monograph. It speaks a powerful word in celebration and defence of the fragile ecologies of the Southwest, and provides a model for how both environmental literature and ecocriticism itself can contribute to deeper political, cultural and sensory engagement with our “life-places”. Ultimately though, *Xerophilia* reminds us that stories, and particularly stories of places, are central to the health, protection and sustainability of all the places of the Earth.

Notes

1. Noelene Kelly is currently completing a PhD in nature writing at Victoria University, Melbourne. The Bogong High Plains in Victoria’s high country is the focus of her doctoral studies.