Environmental humanities: A report on a seminar in Spain

Margarita Carretero-González

From 28 to 30 November 2016, the Universitat Politècnica de València in Spain hosted the first of three seminars planned by a research project labelled 'Environmental Humanities: Strategies for ecological empathy and the transition towards sustainable societies'. As is suggested by the title of this first seminar – *Times of transition: The role of humanities facing the socio-ecological crisis* – participants exchanged ideas on the different ways the humanities can contribute to raising awareness about the pressing environmental crisis, at a time when socio-economic issues have once again relegated the environment to the background of most citizens' concerns.

The research project brings together scholars from different universities in Spain who are working in the visual arts, literary criticism (ecocriticism and ecofeminism) and environmental ethics. This particular seminar included presentations not only by members of the project but also by related scholars and grass-roots activists. Plenary speakers Jorge Riechmann (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid) and Ernest García (Universitat de València) looked into the possible shapes that post-carbon societies could take in the 'Anthropocene', with both agreeing that the role humanity can play is now actually one of mitigation – rather than prevention – of the effects of anthropogenic climate change, given the impossibility of reversing them in the short term. In another plenary session, I examined the different projects active in Spain in the fields of citizen science and citizen humanities, contrasting them with other crowdsourcing initiatives being developed in other countries. This generated a lively debate on the different ways in which citizens and scholars can work together in developing projects oriented to raising environmental awareness. The arts can certainly play a key role in leading cultures of transition; indeed, they are already doing so, as amply evidenced by the last plenary speaker, Anne Douglas, from Robert Gordon University.

Because the Environmental Humanities initiative comprises two sub-projects – 'Visual Arts, Ethics and Ecological Empathy' and 'Stories for Change', led, respectively, by head researchers José Luis Albelda (Universitat Politècnica de València) and Carmen Flys (Universidad de Alcalá) – the seminar also offered simultaneous workshops on creative writing (coordinated by José Manuel Marrero Henríquez, from the Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, and a writer himself) and artistic expression (coordinated by artist and researcher Lorena Lozano). Marrero-Henríquez asked participants to write about one natural spot that they considered worth preserving, with the goal of exploring how individual memory and personal experience can be interwoven in a text in order to evoke ecological empathy. Lozano, on her part, provided participants with the tools to create pieces of art which could function as vectors of change and empathy in the transition towards more sustainable societies, one of the goals of the visual arts sub-project. The seminar was organised by members of this sub-project; therefore most of the papers that were presented dealt with individual artists' and scholars' explorations of how they engage with their work as an instrument to effect social and environmental change.

About the author

Margarita is Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Granada, Spain, a Fellow of the Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics and a member of GIECO, a Spanish research group in ecocriticism. Her research interests include ecocriticism, ecofeminism and posthumanism.

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Meeting title

Times of transition: The Role of Humanities Facing the Socio-ecological Crisis

Location

Valencia, Spain

Date

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Figure 1. A view across the urban orchards of Benimaclet, which were visited by delegates at the meeting.

Delegates also had the privilege of visiting the urban orchards of Benimaclet (Figure 1), a successful, inspiring example of the triumph of neighbourhood cooperation and self-management against real-estate speculation. The community association of Benimaclet reclaimed an area that had been abandoned after the construction firm in charge of building an urban project that included a park went bankrupt, transforming it into a magnificent series of urban orchards, and giving to the land a less intensive function in this fertile region of the Iberian peninsula. The orchards are self-managed and, by ensuring food sovereignty, have completely transformed the lives of those in the neighbourhoods. Furthermore, they have been instrumental in tightening the social fabric – even filling in generation gaps.

All in all, the seminar succeeded in being transdisciplinary not only in its intersectional approach to studying the role of the humanities in bringing about socio-environmental change, but also in looking into ongoing projects that are changing people's realities and favourably contributing to preserving their most immediate social and natural environment. ■

Artwork: exhibition view right; detail on next page

by **Jelena Micic**

Higher-resolution versions: https://is.gd/ecoartwork

About the artwork: Constructed from waste nets from food packaging.

From the artist: These nets are a potential ecological danger. The usual act following the consumption process would be to simply throw them away and pretend they never existed. Instead, I use them as building blocks, making them more visible.