

*Isabel Alves*

*Universidade de Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro, Portugal*

Ana Isabel Queiroz and Inês de Ornellas e Castro, editors, *Falas da Terra no Século XXI: What do we see green?* (Lisboa: Esfera do Caos, 2011), 251pp.

This is a groundbreaking publication which gives proof that Portugal's academic community is beginning to respond to the global environmental disruption in new ways that break the confines of traditional disciplines. Finally and visibly, literary critics, as well as scholars from numerous other fields, are experimenting with new approaches to the study of nature and culture that express a willingness to contribute to a better world. Terms such as 'nature', 'landscape' and 'ecocriticism' are assuming greater prominence within the humanities. This development is, of course, not entirely new. Scholars such as Ana Isabel Queiroz and Viriato Soromenho-Marques have worked for some time on the interconnectedness between literature and landscape. Both critics have focused on the interrelation between places, people, animals and plants in the work of Portuguese authors. However, within literary studies, the theme remained marginal. The publication of *Falas da terra: what do we see green?* signals a change in this state of affairs. It represents a confluence of efforts supported by the Universidade Nova de Lisboa, the Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia, and by the Gulbenkian Environment Program, which is committed to promoting scientific debate, reflection on environmental questions and environmental preservation as constituent features of citizenship.

The book is divided into two main parts; one is dedicated to general considerations on "being green" in Portugal, ecocriticism, landscape, and art. The second part focuses on individual Portuguese authors. The two introductory texts offer general information both on the structure of the book and reflections on the specific situation of Portuguese ecocriticism. In her opening note, Ana Isabel Queiroz highlights the fact that in the past, environmental topics were studied by scholars from the natural and social sciences; nowadays, this area of study is becoming increasingly interdisciplinary, with new approaches being developed in philosophy, literature, and history. In Portugal, too, the interdisciplinary approach to environment is expanding and consolidating, and literary studies are an important part of this trend, as they are now actively engaged in the preservation of a green and healthy planet for all. The project "Falas da Terra: ambiente e tradição popular Portuguesa" [tales of the earth: environment and the Portuguese popular tradition], which is centered at the Instituto de Estudos de Literatura Tradicional, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, aims at analyzing Portuguese oral traditions, an important reservoir of knowledge concerning the ways in which the Portuguese have been connecting to the natural world. Queiroz points out that Portuguese authors, both in the oral and the high literary tradition, have always been

sensitive to the natural world, as demonstrated by authors such as Sebastião da Gama, Aquilino Ribeiro, Miguel Torga, Carlos de Oliveira, and José Saramago. Her introductory essay “Ambiente: o discurso e a crítica” thus gives a useful summary of environmental themes in Portuguese literature and of the development of environmental education in Portugal. “Leituras para o século XXI” by Inês Castro provides an overview of the texts which compose *Falas da terra: what do we see green?* Castro points out that the debate on how the humanities and the arts can contribute to a better understanding of the environmental crisis needs to be expanded in Portugal. She emphasizes how literary discourse can convey an environmental ethic, thus contributing to a new cosmology, epistemology and metaphysics (24).

Ana Paula Guimarães, a scholar trained not only in the study of traditional literatures, but also in biology and philosophy, has developed an interdisciplinary project which aims at analyzing the multiple and complex relationships between human beings and texts, seeing both as living entities. “Everything green dries/when the summer heat arrives”: these two lines from a traditional Portuguese poem characterize not only the sadness at the loss of nature’s verdure, but constitute a metaphor for human loss, as well. If the green color disappears from nature, the human soul will dry out. Guimarães’ examples from popular lore illustrate how the language of traditional literature provides a medium through which Portuguese culture has maintained relationships of familiarity and proximity with the natural world: the mountain, the river, the tree, and the stone (40). Viriato Soromenho-Marques, a dynamic and widely respected voice when it comes to the study of philosophy and the environment in Portugal, presents a short but incisive and poetic text on the association between landscape and the human condition. He asks: what does it mean to talk about nature? What do our landscapes say (about us)? Bringing together ideas from Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Stuart Mill and the Portuguese poet Teixeira de Pascoaes, Soromenho-Marques reflects on the effective deprivation for the human species if nature, with its diversity and colorfulness, was destroyed; if that happened, the planet earth would be transformed into a monotonous, death-colored landscape.

Set in the middle of the first part, Carmen Flys-Junquera’s essay “Literature and Ecocriticism as Environmental Activism” is another central text in this publication. Flys-Junquera summarizes the important trends in the field of ecocriticism and aims at “highlight[ing] the role of literary scholarship (...) in the current environmental crisis” (58). As case studies, she presents readings of Williams’s autobiographical novel *Refuge*, and of several works from Chicano literature. Flys-Junquera demonstrates how literature can reveal all the threads in the global tapestry, drawing attention not only to social injustice (64), but at the same time sensitizing us to the plight of non-human others (73). She stresses the importance of forging alliances between ecocriticism and political activism, whose work she sees as intrinsically related: “by helping to restore

the ability of humans to ‘hear’ our earth others [...], literary scholars become environmental activists, contributing not only to increasing awareness of environmental issues, but [...] suggesting alternative values and ways of living on this earth” (75).

The last two articles of the first part contribute examine the subject of hunting and fishing in oral narratives from Europe and South America (José Manuel Pedrosa) and in the science fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin (Tonia L. Payne). Pedrosa reflects on how human beings exert power over the so-called “inferior creatures” and the natural world more generally, actions that in traditional narratives (but also in many contemporary films) often lead to punishment. As Payne shows, the same holds true for Le Guin’s stories; according to her, “[c]ontemporary Western society is dedicated to a belief that, given sufficient knowledge and technological expertise, we can gain control of everything around us – and of ourselves” (101). Both articles concur that what is needed is a change of heart whereby we “begin to feel the stirrings of a sense of kinship with those nonhuman others, a kinship that makes it difficult to deny them their right to inclusion in our ethical structures” (111). The second part of the publication is dedicated to the study of six contemporary Portuguese writers: Gonçalo M. Tavares (\*1970, Luanda, Angola), Rui Cardoso Martins (\*1967, Portalegre), Mário de Carvalho (\*1944, Lisboa), valter hugo mãe (\*1971, Saurimo, Angola), Álvaro Magalhães (\*1951, Porto) and Joana Bértholo (\*1982, Lisboa). Under the title “It was never necessary to talk about green,” Carlos Augusto Ribeiro presents six graphic illustrations, which he puts in a close dialogue with the literary work of Bértholo. Each study aims at explicating the specific forms which environmental consciousness and ethics take in the work of these writers. Together, these essays succeed in demonstrating the great variety and depth of environmental engagement in contemporary Portuguese literature. Not only does it challenge critics to rethink the relationship between literature and environmental crisis; it also shapes the values and preferences of Portuguese readers, instructing them about the dangers of not paying attention to the interconnections between the human and the non-human.

Even though the volume is mainly directed at a Portuguese audience (11 texts out of 14 are in Portuguese), its emphatically interdisciplinary orientation (among the contributors are not only literary critics, but also lawyers, biologists, and philosophers) should make it a model for ecocritical work in other languages, as well. Without a doubt, it will stand as a hallmark in the development of ecocritical studies in Portugal.