

Sustainability and Latin American Literature: Initial Thoughts

Nancy Gates-Madsen, Luther College

I have very little experience or expertise related to sustainability, so this essay serves more as an outline of some initial thoughts on what I hope and plan to do, rather than a description of what I have already done. As a teacher of Spanish language and Latin American literature (mainly related to the legacies of authoritarianism), I haven't had much opportunity to incorporate sustainability into my teaching (aside from the lone chapter dedicated to "el medio ambiente" (*the environment*) in our current language textbook). However, teaching the "Corn" section of Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma* started me thinking about how I might incorporate issues of sustainability into an upper level Latin American literature seminar. Many Luther students combine a Spanish major or minor with areas of study in the sciences or environmental studies, and I hope my participation in this workshop will help me develop a strong course offering that will help students think about issues of sustainability from a literary and cultural perspective.

I have just started Shawn William Miller's *An Environmental History of Latin America*, which I hope will provide some ideas of how to conceptualize the course, along with my participation in the workshop. In the remainder of this essay I provide some preliminary ideas that I hope to refine in collaboration with other participants.

Latin America has a rich written tradition that chronicles the shifting relationships between humans and the natural world. Texts from first encounters and conquest describe the New World as everything from an Earthly Paradise to a woman's breast (emphasizing its unlimited natural bounty and beauty), while later works during the colonial period and beyond underscore the importance of civilizing the savage wilderness. Only very recent texts address issues of environmental preservation, so I would like students to be able to see how some of the more contemporary debates / perceptions / attitudes toward the environment have evolved in Latin America. I hope that by exploring these issues in a historical, geographical, and cultural context that is different from their own, students will enrich their understanding of the relationship between humans and nature in Latin America as well as their own understanding of sustainability.

I had initially envisioned sustainability as being primarily an environmental issue (natural wilderness, wildlife habitat, etc.). But Michael Pollan's brief mention of the Mexican diet in *The Omnivore's Dilemma* got me thinking about the importance of corn in Latin American literature, and how a consideration of this iconic crop might lead to some interesting

thoughts regarding sustainability in Latin America. The January 2007 protests in Mexico City over rising corn prices mirror the 1692 corn riots in the same city detailed by Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, and I'm curious to see how an exploration of one might illuminate an understanding of the other. I have also always been interested in teaching Miguel Angel Asturias's rather complex yet fundamental text *Hombres de maíz* (Men of Maize), and I'm thinking that this consideration of corn as fundamental for sustaining an entire people might help students comprehend both the text and its broader importance.

Finally, a talk I heard recently on campus got me thinking about issues of environmental racism and how this issue also plays out in Latin American literature. The representation of indigenous peoples in literary works has remained a subject of debate and discussion since the chronicles of the first encounters and the aforementioned calls to tame the "savage" wilderness (which included subjugating native peoples as well as populating the *pampas*). I'm interested to see how viewing some of these works through a lens of human and cultural sustainability might enrich students' understanding of the issues of human rights and environmental racism these texts highlight.

I have just started thinking about this topic, and one of my biggest goals for the workshop is to ensure I am incorporating issues of sustainability in a meaningful way (rather than some type of "add sustainability and stir" model). I am excited to meet other participants and enter into the larger conversation regarding incorporating sustainability into the curriculum. I see this course as a first step, but I expect my participation in this workshop will lead to some interesting ideas about how to think about sustainability in our broader Spanish offerings as well.