

dramatizations and symbol-building efforts has, Staudt argues, “widened the visibility of the murders to broad audiences, not simply those who read newspapers but also those who imbibe popular culture.”

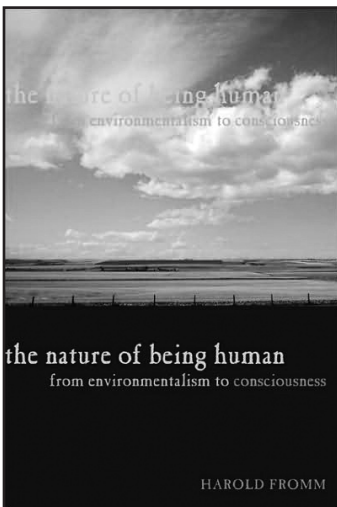
The activism has had a hit-and-miss effect on federal and local government and law enforcement agencies. Staudt covers how the work of activist campaigns and non-governmental organizations has made little headway with the problem of “nearly intractable” police corruption in Juárez and northern Mexico, has yielded few prosecutions of suspects (“less than ten convictions have occurred since 1993”), and with no end to the pervasive violence. But they have succeeded in spurring the Juárez government into implementing a crime prevention program, a staggering feat considering the apathy and impunity with which the police force functions, and in compelling federal governmental agencies into making changes to the chauvinism of male-dominated offices by appointing women to positions of governmental influence. Apart from the assorted gains and setbacks of the various facets of the movement, the principal goal of the activism is boldly announced both by Staudt’s study and her steadfast ethos: that the urgency of the activism is most successful when it settles into culture-altering judiciousness of “the struggle for justice, against crime, and for deeper democracy.”

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*The Nature of Being Human: From Environmentalism to Consciousness* by Harold Fromm. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009. 259 pp. \$35 hardback.



Like many Americans, Harold Fromm has been a nomad. Raised in New York, largely educated in the Midwest, where he pursued his academic career, and now living in Tucson, he became personally aware of industrial pollution while living what at first seemed an idyllic existence on a small farm near Gary, Indiana, and realized that there is no such thing as “local weather.” After moving to Tucson, he came to realize that “wilderness” is a construct and that “[v]aluing nature is a middle-class enterprise,” which comes from having a full stomach and other comforts of modern industrial society. At his most rigorous, Fromm insists that in the strict

sense, "There is no environment, only an ensemble of elements recycled through every existing thing."

As this statement implies, Fromm is a thorough-going materialist and, more and more clearly in the progression of essays over three decades, a neo-Darwinist who, drawing on the work of neurobiologists and other scientists, questions the concepts of free will, even the existence of a self, though he does perceive that there is such a thing as consciousness. He attacks various expressions of dualistic philosophies that "posit immaterial spirits, souls, selves, and thoughts with the preposterous ability to initiate bodily actions and survive physical death."

Fromm is no kinder to "deep ecologists" or biocentrists, whom he sees as mirror images of the religious right, claiming as both do to speak for unseen and unverifiable concepts that are projections of the speaker's ego and will to power. All biocentrists are necessarily anthropocentric as well as inconsistent, since, to put it bluntly, as Fromm often does, the only good biocentrist is a dead one. He also speaks harshly of the Modern Language Association establishment because it has seemed willfully ignorant of science and because, "for all its pious mouthings of 'democracy,' the academic left has become a profoundly mendacious and totalitarian image of the radical right."

Since the book is composed of consciously unrevised essays published over thirty years and since it is truly interdisciplinary (be careful, administrators, of what you wish for), it is impossible in a short review to trace all of the arguments, some of which, Fromm recognizes, can never be resolved.

Readers may wonder what this book has to do with *Southwestern American Literature*. For one thing, historically speaking, the Association for the Study of the Literature of the Environment grew out of a session at the Western Literature Association meeting in 1991, many environmental writings canonized or questioned deal with the American West, and many WLA members I used to see at meetings have moved, partly or entirely, to ASLE. For another, Fromm presents the arguments of other authors—many of the chapters, increasingly dense and theoretical, were originally book reviews—and also reflects on his own experience as breathing (sometimes with difficulty) *homo sapiens*, as writer, as traveler, and as a self-proclaimed aesthete who believes that art is "ordinary behavior made special." People in any area can profit from experience and learning that is moving towards wisdom.

Those who have time to read only selections should turn to Chapter 10, "Ecology and Ecstasy on Interstate 80," in which Fromm connects the West to the rest of America and to the planet—and realizes while driving his Saturn at high speed and listening to Wagner on the radio that "[t]echnology is a metaphor for evolving human life, with consciousness as its blueprint." At his most Darwinian, he insists, in italics, that "*To be alive is to be a murderer!*" Hard words, mitigated a bit in the book's final lines, where all too briefly

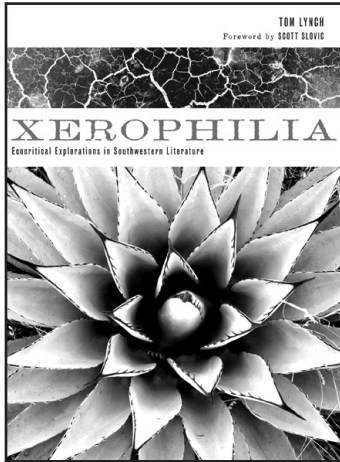
he considers post-Darwinian ethics or at least necessary social constraints on nature red in tooth and claw.

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*Xerophilia: Ecocritical Explorations in Southwestern Literature* by Tom Lynch. Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2008. 264 pp. \$35 hardback.



As the title of *Xerophilia* shows, Tom Lynch does not shy away from hard words (it means “love of arid places”). He is contrarian in other ways: he dismisses “green” as a favorable term in describing attempts to preserve the Sonoran and Chihuahuan Deserts; he accepts the term “Southwest” reluctantly because “[i]t is ethnocentric, nationalistic, and misleading”; and he quarrels with the term “desert” because “the term defines a place by what it lacks rather than by what it possesses.”

Many of Lynch’s positions seem—once he has stated them—self-evident. For example, he rejects not only the term “Southwest” but other political and regional designations

in favor of a sense of bioregionalism, which “implies a political and cultural practice and an ecologically based form of place-conscious identity.”

Lynch’s goal is to further consciousness—and unconsciousness—of this region and, by implication, other regions by analyzing the work of writers whose works further his project. Most of them would not usually be regarded as nature or ecological writers; rather, only a few novelists and poets are cited. His canon is further limited because he cannot give full support to writers whose work is so “visually aestheticized” that other senses are devalued or ignored. Only works that present “a more encompassing and sympathetic love of their desert homeland” get full approval.

If this sounds like “eco-realism” is analogous to “socialist realism,” that’s because it is. If a work “can serve to protect nature by fostering an imaginative and ethical consideration for that world,” then it is good. While some of the passages he cites clearly have aesthetic value, Lynch is not really interested in those qualities. Very little in his commentary would lead any but the most committed reader to seek out these works.

This is especially true of the chapter on “Acequia Culture” in northern New Mexico and to some extent of the one on “Border(home)lands.” At

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