Green(ing) English: Voices Howling in the Wilderness?

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> Civilization has been slow to give up on our myth of the Earth's infinite generosity. . . . Rather grandly, we have overdrawn our accounts.
>
> —*Barbara Kingsolver, "Water Is Life"*

> If the world we love is going to be saved—urban, rural, and wild—it will be by people standing their ground in the places they love, speaking out and digging in.
>
> —*Terry Tempest Williams, "Wi4 Tribute to Indie Booksellers & Local First Initiatives"*

Most of us agree that one of our primary aims in English teaching is to increase students' understanding of what it means to be more fully human. We speak eloquently about the roles we play as teachers to deepen students' understanding of life and to realize the importance of universal human concerns through literary interpretation. We work tirelessly to enhance students' awareness of different cultural values and to help them develop acceptance, empathy, and respect for others through meaningful reading and writing activities. We are constantly in search of imaginative and rhetorical literature that will urge students to stay emotionally alive and morally sensitive, that is, essentially human, in the face of the pressures of an increasingly technological and interconnected society, with its mass media and mass culture that threaten to blunt the mind's powers of critical thinking and reduce them to a state of indiscriminate conformity.

To accomplish these ends discipline-wide, we have integrated insights gleaned from studies of race, gender, class, sexuality, language—among other social identities—to engage the fullness of humanity in our teaching and learning work. Nevertheless, our humanity is keenly dependent on our biology; success of human cultures is unmistakably linked to the viability of our geophysical world. Our habitat—the planet—is in deep trouble; we have pushed human carrying capacity to its limits. Human consumption and its frequently toxic by-products have sullied our home place nearly beyond repair.

Consider just some of the glaring issues we face because of overpopulation and over-consumption of resources and energy: Climate change. Runaway toxic oil spills in Prince William Sound and the Gulf of Mexico. Poisonous disasters of mind-numbing scale—the Bhopal gas tragedy; nuclear meltdowns at Chernobyl and Three Mile Island; chemicals leaching from a dump site upon which homes and schools were built in Love Canal, New York; hexavalent chromium contamination of drinking water in Hinkley, California; asbestos poisoning in Libby, Montana; contamination from above-ground atomic bomb testing in Nevada that has given rise to a range of health difficulties among "downwinders" (not to forget the health concerns from radiation sickness suffered by survivors of A-bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki); a toxic plastic garbage island twice the size of Texas fouling the Pacific. Dwindling potable water resources. Heightened air pollution and increases in

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Smoke billowing from nuclear reactors. © JupiterImages/Photos.com.

respiratory diseases such as asthma. Devastating hurricanes and floods attributed to changing weather patterns as a result of global warming. Extended droughts. Famine and hunger. Questions about food safety. Extinction of flora and fauna species at unprecedented rates. A doomsday seed vault in the arctic to protect food species from war and disaster. Research linking ADHD to certain toxins in the environment. Alarming increases in rates of cancer and other health risks tied to environmental contamination and degradation. These environmental and health problems are largely of our own making; they are a byproduct of human cultures and the result of a crisis in ethical decision-making (Worster).

Yet in literature and language arts classes at the secondary level, where we do not hesitate to study the impact of ethical mores in human lives, where we do not hesitate to teach respect for life, we have fairly well ignored our impact on the natural world or our relationships with it. If we look at the major publications of our profession, we would never suspect that "the earth's life support systems were under stress. Indeed, [we] might never know that there was an earth at all" (Glotfelty xvi). Ecological literacy expert David W. Orr contends that "all education is environmental education" both by inclusion and exclusion (*Ecological Literacy* 90). By what is included or excluded, we teach students that they are "a part of or apart from" the natural world (12). The implicit environmental education, which English language arts students are receiving through exclusion, is that our ecological relationship with our habitat is either a matter of little importance or something only relevant to "science geeks." As high school English teacher Clark Meyer of Atlanta explained when asked to address his faculty about (the lack of) environmental education at his school:

> Literature—with its timeless role of examining the human condition—has always evolved to address the significant issues before each generation. In our curriculum, then, we rightly read and discuss works that deal thoughtfully with weighty and complex themes like race and gender and war. But as contemporary writing rapidly evolves to raise new questions about humanity's role as a citizen of the ecological community, this new environmental literature has yet to be significantly included in the mainstream educational canon. That omission, I think, does send a message. (9 Sept. 2008)

We disregard our planet and the dangers we face by exploiting it to our and our students' imminent peril. Each new disaster seems to mock us. How many disasters will it take before we cease to be shocked and start to behave differently (Kingsolver)? We must begin to teach English "as if our lives depended on it" (Rich) because quite literally they do. We must begin to teach English to show respect both for human life and for our environment because to fail to do so will likely send us the way of the dinosaurs. Even as the planet will rejuvenate over time, we as a species will not. Cheryll Glotfelty, the United States's first professor of Literature and the Environment, explains that "we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet's basic life support systems. . . . Either we change our ways or we face global catastrophe, destroying much beauty and exterminating

countless fellow species in our headlong race to apocalypse . . . as environmental problems compound, work as usual seems unconscionably frivolous. If we're not part of the solution, we're part of the problem" (xx–xxi). Getting through the environmental crises we now face requires understanding human impact on our environment. It requires understanding how ethical systems that promote overconsumption of energy and resources ignore a "land ethic," which is as Aldo Leopold articulated it in *A Sand County Almanac*—"A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community [soils, water, plants and animals]. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" (262). It means teaching the persuasive narratives and communicative tools that might promote empathy for both human and nonhuman species, for the soils, water, and air on which all of life depends to avoid human and other species' ultimate extinction and to promote meaningful systemic reforms.

As English teachers, we may not think that we have direct power to reform these systems. However, it is well within our capacity to help others understand the ethics that support either "man against nature" or a reciprocal interdependence of human nature, the land, and nonhuman species. It is well within our capacity "[to consider] nature not just as the stage upon which the human story is acted out, but as an actor in the drama" (Glotfelty xxi). It is well within our capacity to think about human character as environmentally or ecologically embedded rather than immune. And it is well within our capacity to introduce students to writers that can open minds to the notion that human actions affect the ecosystems we depend on and "proclaim a lofty new mission for self-government: to energize and empower the 'millions to whom the beauty and the ordered world of nature still have meaning that is deep and imperative'" (Carson, qtd. in Gore xvii). English teachers specialize in questions of vision, values, ethical understanding, meaning, point of view, tradition, imagination, culture, language and literacy—"keys to today's environmental crises at least as fundamental as scientific research, technological know-how, and legislative regulation" (Buell 5). Our expertise in addressing the aesthetic, ethical, and sociopolitical implications of the most pressing human concerns of our time enable us also to reach toward embrace of environmental problems. In doing so, we can engage those in whose power change will occur more likely than scientific explanations alone might. It is in these ways that we can make a substantial contribution to environmental awareness and citizenship.

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So where might we begin?

The relatively new fields of ecocriticism in literary studies and ecocomposition in rhetoric and composition studies provide a usable foundation for those of us interested in green(ing) English. Nevertheless, even suggesting that interest in the environment within English studies is a relatively new concern is somewhat misleading. Contemplation of nature has been "a dominant or at least residual concern for literary scholars and intellectual historians ever since these fields came into being" (Buell 2). Therefore, we might look differently at some of our most beloved and frequently taught writers in the British and American Romantic tradition—Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Dickinson, Thoreau, Emerson, Whitman—and herald them for their "love of nature." And we might easily take up the greater environmental significance of "setting" rather than relegating it offhandedly to "the locale in which the story takes place" or as a mere "backdrop for the human drama" of the narrative (Buell 4; Glotfelty).

Beyond shifting our traditional perspectives toward a heightened ecological gaze, however, there are several pedagogical doors that ecocriticism and ecocomposition have opened, some of which I review here for their environmentally directed teaching and learning possibilities in English language arts. There are too many approaches and subjects to cover adequately in this space; however, I will briefly explore six that seem most promising for study of English language arts at the secondary level: ecological literacies; reading green; "nature" writing or environmental literatures; insights from ecocomposition; place-based reading and writing, including indigenous literatures; environmental justice movements; and war as an environmental concern.

Ecological Literacies

Literacy is the ability to read. Numeracy is the ability to count. Ecological literacy, according to Garrett Hardin, is the ability to ask, "What then?"
—*David W. Orr,* Ecological Literacy: Education and the Transition to a Postmodern World

To understand what we need to know to green English, I would say both simply and profoundly: read David W. Orr's foundational *Ecological Literacy: Education and the Transition to a Postmodern World.* Orr asserts that reading, writing, and calculating are necessary but primarily "indoor" skills. "Ecological literacy . . . requires the more demanding capacity to observe nature with insight, a merger of landscape and mindscape"—learning to love it (86). It is driven by a search for knowledge, a sense of wonder, and "sheer delight in being alive in a beautiful, mysterious, bountiful world." This sense of wonder is rooted in emotions or "'biophilia,' what E. O. Wilson terms an affinity for the living world" (86). Orr claims that without that affinity and nourishment of a sense of kinship with all living things, literacy of any other sort will not much help. He also states that development of an affinity for the living world is dependent on aesthetic appreciation of all that is beautiful and alive in the world. It means developing a sense of place, which requires more direct contact with the natural aspects of a place—with soils, landscape, and wildlife. He argues for "more urban parks, summer camps, green belts, wilderness areas, public seashores . . . trees, river parks, meandering greenbelts, and urban farms where people can see, touch, and experience nature in a variety of ways" (89).

Orr posits in *Ecological Literacy* six principles or frames of mind that should be applied to educational practice in order to develop ecological literacy:

1. "[A]ll education is environmental education" (90).
2. "[E]nvironmental issues are complex and cannot be understood through a single discipline or department" (90).
3. "[F]or inhabitants, education occurs in part as a dialogue with a place and has the characteristics of good conversation" (90).
4. "[T]he way education occurs is as important as its content" (91).
5. "[E]xperience in the natural world is both an essential part of understanding the environment, and conducive to good thinking" (91).
6. "[E]ducation relevant to the challenge of building a sustainable society will enhance the learner's competence with natural systems" (92).

One might wonder how the development of such skills and awarenesses relates to English teaching. We teach aesthetic awareness, respect for life, awareness of worlds that our students may only encounter through the literatures we teach. Ecological literacy requires comprehension of the dynamics of human interactions with the world. It requires a thorough understanding of the ways in which people and whole societies have staged an urge to power and become destructive through "the paradox of rational means harnessed to insane ends [as] portrayed in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus,* Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein,* Melville's *Moby Dick,* and Dostoevsky's "Legend of the Grand Inquisitor" (Orr, *Ecological Literacy* 93). Students cannot be considered ecologically literate, Orr asserts, until they have read Thoreau, Kropotkin, Muir, Albert Howard, Alfred North Whitehead, Gandhi, Schweitzer, Aldo Leopold, Lewis Mumford, Rachel Carson, E. F. Schumacher, and Wendell Berry. And that, obviously, is where we come in. What we do in English language arts is all about noticing, responding to the moment, listening and paying attention, observing, learning to communicate, understanding how things relate to each other. It is about developing the habits of mind for looking closely, thinking critically, thinking by analogy, changing scale, and theorizing—figuring out why something works the way it does or why do we do it this way instead of another (Ruef). This at its essence is what ecological literacy requires. There are real, tangible connections upon which we might shift our present gaze to think with a more eco-critical eye in the teaching that we do. The following sections offer some practical suggestions embedded in the work of many.

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Reading Green

Literature can help us think about how we "relate to places, other people, and other species . . . showing us who we are and challenging us to imagine who we might be" (Anderson, Slovic, and O'Grady xxi). "Reading green"—which I define as focusing on "environments" in literary expression—can help us to explore our relationship to the environment and the role literature can play in shaping cultural responses to environmental realities.

"Reading green" involves both selection and approach. The imaginative and rhetorical selections we choose to read with students and how we choose to read these literatures demonstrate what we value. A primary way to "read green," then, is to examine what is commonly called "nature" writing or environmental literature, as I discuss further below.

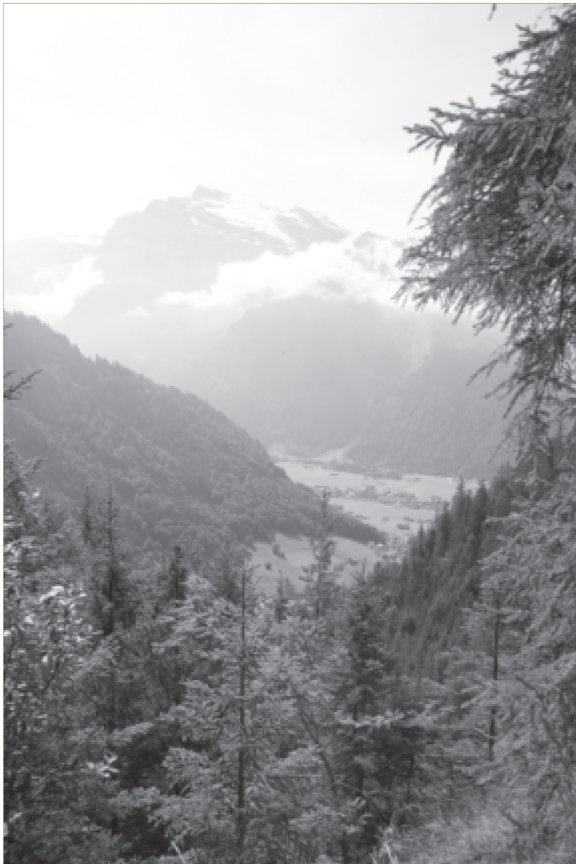
Other ways of "reading green" may seem less obvious but are readily applicable to any selections we might teach in the classroom. These methods for reading green generally include ideas for approaching literature in ways that explore the relationship between literary expression and the world beyond human affairs, meaning that which encompasses all the surroundings or environments in which human and nonhuman species carry on their daily lives. As ecocritic Glen A. Love writes,

> In some of the literary texts that we study and discuss, this enveloping natural world is part of the subject on the printed page before us. But even when it is not, it remains a given, a part of the interpretive contexts, whether or not we choose to deal with it in our study and teaching. . . . As the circumstances of the natural world intrude ever more pressingly into our teaching and writing, the need to consider the interconnections, the implicit dialogue between the text and the environmental surroundings, becomes more and more insistent. (16)

With this approach, the most likely tactic for reading green would be to analyze how the characters, actors, and agents in the literatures we teach affect the setting or stage of the narrative, as mentioned earlier, or, conversely, how the setting of the narrative avails characters and agents to behave in particular ways. We might imagine scenarios by which we can explore the ramifications of human behavior as depicted in the settings of literature for the planet, for landscape, for flora and fauna, and the impact of "nature" on human experience. We might engage with students in reading green through dialogue with them from a more ecocritically informed perspective about literature and its relationships to nature and environmental concerns. For example, T. S. Eliot stated, "But for the River, [*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*] might be only a sequence of adventures with a happy ending. A river, a very big and powerful river, is the only natural force that can wholly determine the course of human peregrination. . . . Thus the River makes the book a great book. . . . Mark Twain is a native, and the River God is his God" (290). To consider with students how the river itself is a character in this greatest of American novels (Hemingway) and how it affects Jim's and Huck's movement and relationship throughout the narrative would be to consider a green reading. One might also reciprocally consider while studying *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* how the effects of human development on the Mississippi River since Twain's time have affected human disasters such as the flooding of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina and the human and natural disasters caused to the wetlands and coastlines in the Mississippi Delta by the BP Deepwater oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. One might otherwise pair Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* with a reading of Huck Finn as a way to highlight the remarkable recovery from near extinction of the American bald eagle as a result of the outcry that followed Carson's publication, which brought attention to the ill effects DDT and other chemical pesticides were having on avian populations reliant on major waterways for food. Alton, Illinois, on the Mississippi flyway—just north of the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers at Cairo, which Jim and Huck missed that fateful foggy night, sending them deep into the slave-holding South—hosts the largest winter population of American bald eagles outside of Alaska.

There is no shortage of examples in the literature we study by which we may read "from an ecological rather than a narrowly human-centered perspective" (Love 35). Along these lines, one might ask students to consider the evolutionary-biological viewpoints in Melville's *Moby Dick* from the por-

trayals of struggle Ishmael and Ahab engage with the whale and the ocean (Love 34–35). Or we might contemplate the deep ecological conflicts portrayed among animals (both human and nonhuman) and the natural world in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea.* Or, we might consider Willa Cather's "experimental stylistic techniques" in *The Professor's House,* which enhance "our sense of the rhetorical interlacing of cultural/aesthetic and biological elements in the narrative" (Love 11). We might take up the most "controversial and vexing issue of evolutionary theory and practice, as well as the center of political and moral discussion: the question of altruism versus selfishness in human nature and behavior" as depicted in the literature that we read (Love 11). More broadly we might ask students to consider the potential damaging effects of human behavior on the natural world and think about ways to become less anthropocentric and more "ecocentric"[1] in their attitudes and behaviors.



A view of the natural world. © 2008 JupiterImages/Photos.com.

Through reading green we might begin to invest our attentions toward the central insights of ecology—that everything is connected—and help students learn compelling motives for thinking beyond ourselves toward rebuilding our relationships with the planet.

"Nature" Writing or Environmental Literatures

Many of the adolescents we teach grow up devoid of experiences in open spaces and natural areas (Louv). Without experiences that celebrate a sense of place in developing our identities, we gain little sense of stewardship of our communities. Love of the natural world in which we all live should be encouraged in secondary education. Teachers can encourage this process through reading "nature" writing or environmental literatures in their classrooms. Such literatures, often filled with adventures and resonant of a writer's deep, passionate attachment to a particular place, can stimulate student interest in literacy achievement. However, teachers may not know where to begin.

Nature writing traditionally deals with individual meditation on one's environment, describing how identity is shaped through a mixture of sentient observation—sights, sounds, smells, and other tactile sensations (Day). Ecocritic Scott Slovik defines nature writing as "literary nonfiction that offers scientific scrutiny of the world (as in the older tradition of literary natural history), explores the private experience of the individual human observer of the world, or reflects upon the political and philosophical implications of the relationships among human beings and the larger planet" (888). According to the preeminent ecocritic Lawrence Buell, nature writing historically has focused on locales beyond urban areas. Contemporarily, many stress that nature writing can be practiced in urban locales as

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well (Buell 144). The term *environmental literatures* more accurately encompasses the current hybridity that exemplifies the ecocritical literary movement today—involving "fusions of 'natural' and 'constructed' environments" (Buell viii).

The works of canonical authors such as Thoreau, Blake, Dickinson, and Emerson, among many others, fit in the broad category of Environmental literatures. Rachel Carson and Aldo Leopold also come readily to mind. As teachers consider nature writing that speaks to students in urban areas, selections might come not only from well-known nature literature but also from "non-mainstream" wilderness writers, such as those by indigenous authors and authors of color (e.g., Linda Hogan, Leslie Marmon Silko, N. Scott Momaday, Lucille Clifton, Langston Hughes, bell hooks, Maxine Hong Kingston, Jamaica Kincaid, Simon J. Ortiz, Pat Mora, Rudolfo Anaya, among many, many others), those from an urban/"non-wild" standpoint (e.g., Robert Michael Pyle, Van Jones, Michael Pollan, Lynda Mapes, among many others), and those written from a local perspective (essays, poems, environmental fiction written about the places you live and teach). Anderson, Slovik, and O'Grady, the editors of *Literature and the Environment: A Reader on Nature and Culture,* state that an unprecedented "burgeoning number of humans have put pen to paper" in the last 50 years "to celebrate connections with plants and animals, to muse on the farmer's relationships to the land, to report travels to distant frontiers where wilderness can still be found, to lament the loss of places and species dear to them, to ponder the cultural and philosophical and economic roots of the worsening crisis, and to praise some little corner of the earth where daily life still maintains contact with what is good, wild, and healthy" (xxi). There are numerous collections of nature writing or environmental literature from which we might select excerpts to teach along with a whole world of writers whose longer works might captivate varied student interests. The titles of anthologies and critical editions are listed in the sidebar (see "Environmental Anthologies and Critical Collections") and offer resources for teachers that include a range of diverse writers both contemporary and historical across a stunning array of genres.

The narratives we select to teach demonstrate what we value. As high school English teacher Clark Meyer queries,

> I have some questions to ask of my profession. In my darker moments, I wonder why I teach my students the distinction between a tercet and a quatrain when they know nothing about tanagers and cardinals. Which kind of learning is more likely to help develop them into the kind of adults that will make our planet a more livable place? And the narratives that might help us at this point in our history, why are they not a part of the canon we typically share in school? In the early years of this new and uncertain century, what does it mean to be educated anymore? Should young people be more familiar with Chaucer and Harper Lee than Rachel Carson or Aldo Leopold? (9 Aug. 2008)

If we do not begin in our profession to teach narratives which make visible that we value making our planet a more livable place, we will continue to slip less and less graciously into environments like those in the science fictional world of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (popularized by the film *Blade Runner*), for example, where we live encapsulated in gloomy artificial and virtual arenas. Is that really where we want to be heading?

Insights from Ecocomposition

Scholars engaged with ecocomposition work in rhetoric and composition studies and place ecological thinking and composition and rhetoric studies in dialogue with one another to consider the ecological properties of discourse and "the ways in which ecologies, environments, locations, places, and natures are discursively affected" (Weisser and Dobrin 2). Ecocomposition is a way of looking at literacy using concepts from ecology. It takes an ecological view of writing that extends beyond the sociocultural processes we usually think of when we teach writing to include aspects such as "nature" and "place." Its main point of reference, borrowed from an article by Sidney I. Dobrin, is "Writing Takes Place" (Weisser and Dobrin 11–26). Insights from ecocomposition help us to think about the ways in which discourse and environments constitute each other, the interrelated ways in which physical and constructed environments affect discursive production and interpretation. Sidney I.

Environmental Anthologies and Critical Collections

Adamson, Joni, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein, eds. *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics, and Pedagogy.* Tucson: U of Arizona P, 2002. Print.

My university students love this collection because it identifies the challenges made by people of color to mainstream environmentalism. Environmental justice activists have linked social inequalities to the uneven distribution of environmental dangers and highlighted grassroots movements in poor communities and communities of color that aim to protect neighborhoods and worksites from environmental degradation and work to gain equal access to the natural resources that sustain their cultures. This collection approaches environmental justice issues from diverse geographical, ethnic, and disciplinary perspectives, always viewing environmental issues as integral to problems of social inequities and oppression. It brings together a collection of multifaceted work by leading scholars, activists, writers, teachers, and artists and is a useful resource for those teachers and students who realize that environmental issues of concern are particularly acute in poor communities and in communities of color and are mostly invisible to mainstream environmental writers.

Anderson, Lorraine, Scott Slovic, and John P. O'Grady, eds. *Literature and the Environment: A Reader on Nature and Culture.* New York: Longman, 1999. Print.

This collection explores humans' relationship to nature and the role literatures can play in shaping a cultural response to environmental realities. It includes early writers such as Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and Mary Austin, along with contemporary writers such as Gary Snyder, Mary Oliver, bell hooks, Jamaica Kincaid, Peter Coyote, and Terry Tempest Williams. It is thematically organized in three parts—the human animal; inhabiting place; and economy and ecology—and includes an additional table of contents organized by genre.

Bryson, J. Scott, ed. *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction.* Salt Lake City: U of Utah P, 2002. Print.

This is a collection of critical essays that address the work of "ecopoets" such as Gary Snyder, Mary Oliver, W. S. Merwin, Linda Hogan, and Wendell Berry, among others, whose poems deal increasingly with environmental and ecological issues. It is a good critical resource for teachers looking for diverse poetry that engages environmental debate.

Coupe, Laurence, ed. *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism.* London: Routledge, 2000. Print.

This volume, having been published first in the United Kingdom, is more worldly than many of the others and contains a fair representation of both British and American authors. This comprehensive work leans toward the critical more than the literary, although it includes both, and it covers the most important aspects of the intersections between ecology, culture, and literature in the expanding field of ecocriticism. It addresses Romantic ecology and its legacy; the earth, memory, and the critique of modernity; nature/culture/gender; ecocritical principles; environmental literary history; and the nature of text. Its unique selection of essays and excerpts is concerned not only with literary questions but also with the "crucial, troubled dialectic of nature and culture" (Gerrard, back matter). This is more a resource for critically minded teachers than something to be used with students.

Finch, Robert, and John Elder, eds. *The Norton Book of Nature Writing.* New York: Norton, 2002. Print. See also Guignard, Lilace Mellin. *A Field Guide to* The Norton Book of Nature Writing. New York: Norton, 2002. Print.

Writers in this volume range from those born in 1720 to 1962. The selections are restricted to works of nonfiction written in English and include canonical American, Native American, African American, Asian American, British, Canadian, Australian, and Caribbean authors. The field guide provides apparatuses to help teachers and students think about and respond to readings in *The Norton Book of Nature Writing.*

Glotfelty, Cheryll, and Harold Fromm, eds. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology.* Athens: U of Georgia P, 1996. Print.

This collection was the first of its kind. Its introduction is a venerable "must read" for anyone who wants to get started with green(ing) English. The critical selections in the volume are organized in three sections: (1) Ecotheory: Reflections on Nature and Culture; (2) Ecocritical Considerations of Fiction and Drama; and (3) Critical Studies of Environmental Literature. Its limitations, according to Buell, are that the early years of ecocritical investigations, as exemplified in this volume, focused too narrowly on "nature writing" as object of study. Nonetheless, it is a foundational volume and worth a read, although some might lose patience with the density of critical language.

Hart, George, and Scott Slovic. *Literature and the Environment.* Westport: Greenwood, 2004. Print.

This collection is an edited volume of essays written by ecocritical scholars, which is part of a series, "Exploring Social Issues through Literature." It introduces readers to eleven authors who are commonly

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Environmental Anthologies and Critical Collections *(continued)*

recognized as major figures in American environmental or "nature" literature and who are well known for exploring social and environmental issues in their literary work: Mary Austin, Loren Eiseley, Rachel Carson, Wallace Stegner, Denise Levertov, Edward Abbey, Ursula K. Le Guin, Gary Snyder, Barry Lopez, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Terry Tempest Williams.

McKibben, Bill, ed. *American Earth: Environmental Writing Since Thoreau.* Foreword by Al Gore. New York: Literary Classics, 2008. Print.

Bill McKibben, an environmentalist rather than a literary scholar, surveys the literature of American environmentalism and organizes it around "the movement," which he says has been "so often driven by a piece of writing" (xxi). The volume is arranged chronologically beginning with Thoreau and proposes "to give some sense of how environmental concern built to a great crest at Earth Day in 1970 and since has begun to explore new directions" and includes nonfiction, poetry and some "tiny chunks" of fiction (xxx). McKibben allows that the volume, though a grand collaboration, reflects his particular take on this literature, this movement, and this moment in time offered in the hope that "they will spur not only reflection but action as well" (xxxi). This volume contains many writers and excerpts that most of the others do not and in that is more eclectic, fresh, and interdisciplinary.

***Rethinking Schools.* "Teaching for Environmental Justice." 23.4 (Summer 2009).**

This special issue contains many practical teaching ideas for addressing issues related to environmental justice in high school and middle school.

Slovic, Scott H., and Terrell F. Dixon, eds. *Being in the World: An Environmental Reader for Writers.* New York: Macmillan, 1993. Print.

This collection is designed to introduce writing teachers and students to many examples of the best American nature writing since Thoreau. It includes almost exclusively nonfiction essays, letters and journals, and short works of fiction. Unlike most, it is not organized chronologically and offers more ethnic and gender diversity and writing styles among contributors along with a useful teaching apparatus. It is divided into four parts: (1) Nature: "Out There"; (2) Human Visitors; (3) Belonging to the World and Abstractions; (4) Thinking about the Environment. The intent is to provide useful models and stimuli for writers and contains numerous writing assignments for getting started.

Dobrin and Christian R. Weisser define ecocompositon as "the study of the relationships between environments (and by that we mean natural, constructed, and even imagined places) and discourse (speaking, writing, and thinking) . . . ecocomposition attempts to provide a more holistic, encompassing framework for studies of the relationship between discourse and environment" (6). Ecocomposition asks, What effects does a place have (or different places have) on writing processes? In what ways is our identity influenced by places, and what bearing does this have on our writing? What sets of relationships help us define our place(s)—including, but not limited to, relationships between writers and readers? How might the sometimes contradictory sets of relationships in which we write allow us to see certain possibilities and foreclose others? How might these relationships define reality for each of us in different ways? ("Ecocomposition").

Derek Owens, author of many works on composition and sustainability, offers some ways to include insights from ecocomposition scholarship and thinking into writing activities that we might ask our students to engage in ("Teaching"). For example, he asks students to develop a "neighborhood portfolio" from some of the following activities: construct a place portrait; research photo essays of your home neighborhoods and document the status of your homes; write oral histories of family members or neighbors, "the older the better"; fashion portraits of cultures or subcultures to which you belong or to which you have access; write commentaries on your work environments or where your parents work, documenting the conditions of those environments, weighing in on what makes them desirable or miserable; assemble critiques of your educational histories; put together plans for better neighborhoods, "'eutopias' (*good* places, as opposed to the idealized perfection of utopia)"; develop a future portrait of how you see the world in several decades (368).

Owens couples the writing he expects students to accomplish with an array of readings that address,

directly and indirectly, matters of preservation, risk, and environmental crises all circulating around the metaphor of sustainability, which he defines in *Composition and Sustainability: Teaching for a Threatened Generation* as "an intergenerational concept that means adjusting our current behavior so that it causes the least amount of harm to future generations," including concern with intragenerational equity; understanding the links between poverty and ecosystem decline; recognizing short- and long-term environmental, social, psychological, and economic impact of conspicuous consumption; making conservation and preservation inevitable effects of our daily lifestyles; forsaking a great many of the trappings of consumerist culture to live more simply, thereby diminishing the impact of our ecological footprints; and looking critically at our contemporary behaviors from the perspective of children living generations hence, and modifying those behaviors accordingly (xi). Owens states, "What I am doing is struggling to fashion a temporary environment where students, through written (and visual) expression and research, might give voice to matters I consider to be of utmost importance to them (and me): the welfare and survival of their local communities, families, aspirations, and future generations" ("Teaching" 368). Others concerned with ecocomposition have engaged students in activities such as, "What is your ecological address? How might you locate the place you live by understanding how water flows through it, how it is used, what other life forms are supported by it and are/were there because of the waters that flow through your habitat?" (Hass). Teachers might also adapt the familiar George Ella Lyon poem "Where I'm From" to investigate native plant and animal names or geological, watershed, and biome features of the places they are from (see Christensen). Many such bioregional and sustainability activities are likewise invoked in place-based education, which I describe in the next section.

Place-Based Reading and Writing, Including Indigenous Literatures

Place-based education uses the concept of "place" or "environment" as an integrating context across disciplines (Sobel). It is characterized by interdisciplinary learning, team-teaching, hands-on experiences that center on problem-solving projects, learner-centered education that adapts to students' individual skills and abilities, and the exploration of the local community and natural surroundings. Laurie Lane-Zucker defines place-based education as

> the pedagogy of community, the reintegration of the individual into her homeground and the restoration of the essential links between a person and her place. . . . Place-based education challenges the meaning of education by asking seemingly simple questions: Where am I? What is the nature of this place? What sustains this community? It often employs a process of re-storying, whereby students are asked to respond creatively to stories of their homeground so that, in time, they are able to position themselves, imaginatively and actually, within the continuum of nature and culture in that place. They become part of the community rather than a passive observer of it. (ii–iii)

Place-based education is not simply a way to integrate the curriculum around a study of place, however, but a way to inspire stewardship, love for home place whether urban or rural, and an authentic renewal and revitalization of civic responsibility that brings education back to the neighborhood (Sobel).

Place-based education is needed so that "the education of citizens might have some direct bearing on the well-being of the social and ecological places people actually inhabit" (Gruenewald 4). The work engaged in place-based education is an embrace of human experience in connection to the experiences of both human and nonhuman others and the natural world with a mindset toward conservation and restoration of our shared environments for future generations (Gruenewald 6). Place-based education works to create experiences where students can build relationships of care for places close to home, wherever that may be (Sobel). As teacher-educator Gregory A. Smith asserts, "The primary value of place-based education lies in the way that it serves to strengthen students' connections to others and to the regions in which they live" (593–94). Place-based education is flourishing in many rural areas; however, it has broad applicability to urban areas as well (Day; Sobel; Stone and Barlow).

I offer four primary ways we might implement place-based education in the English curriculum. One way is to consider the place-value of

ideas provided for reading nature writing and environmental literatures offered in the previous section or by teaching regional literatures as a way of illuminating the particularities of one's home place (see, for example, Smyth and Hansen). Another way is to engage in writing projects centered in local inquiry, such as those immortalized by Eliot Wigginton in his southern Appalachia oral history projects and *Foxfire* series[2] (see also Brooke; Umphrey) or by conducting place-based writing marathons such as those popularized by Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project Director Richard Louth (see Louth). Yet another way is to engage students in activities that lead students to do some nature writing of their own; an excellent resource I use to inspire "nature writing" with my students is *Into the Field: A Guide to Locally-Focused Teaching* (Leslie, Tallmadge, and Wessels), which outlines activities for close observational writing and eco-journal keeping, among others. Yet another approach is to study local indigenous literatures and to conduct place-based writing marathons to locales of indigenous significance in your area (see Epstein). As several ecocritics have pointed out extensively, much can be learned about living well in a place from studying some of the Native American writers writing today and in the past; selections from many indigenous writers are included in the anthologies annotated in the sidebar. In addition, an excellent explication of a place-based project that focuses on study of indigenous narratives was conducted by tribal elders and English students in the Pacific Northwest (see Scheuerman, Gritter, Schuster, and Fisher).

To begin, consider the five approaches to place-based learning described by Smith that might help transform place-based curriculum development in the English language arts into place-based practices: (1) incorporate local cultural studies; (2) investigate local nature studies; (3) investigate, address, and solve authentic community problems; (4) shape local internships and entrepreneurial opportunities that help students find value and economic opportunities in home communities; and (5) get involved in community decision making (587–93).

Place-based education can take many forms. However, as Smith points out, there are several principles of good instruction that commonly apply:

- "[T]eachers and students turn to phenomena immediately around them as a foundation for curriculum development" (593).
- Place-based education emphasizes learning experiences that allow students to become creators of knowledge rather than consumers of knowledge created by others.
- "[S]tudents' questions and concerns play a central role in what is studied" (593).
- Teachers act as experienced guides, co-learners, and brokers of community resources and learning possibilities.
- The wall between school and community is more permeable and crossed with more frequency—community members can play a more active role in the classroom and students can play a more active role in the community (593).

Clearly, place-based approaches mean significant shifts from business as usual in the English language arts classroom. Teachers must take an active role in creating the curriculum, not just dispensing curriculum created by others. We must be willing to take risks and embrace ambiguity. We must see students for their potential as participatory citizens who can make a difference in the communities in which we all live.

Environmental Justice Movements

Environmental justice movements have grown around the world from a confluence of civil rights concerns, antiwar and antinuclear campaigns, women's rights movements, and grassroots organizing around issues of environmental concern (Adamson, Evans, and Stein). Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein, the editors of *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics and Pedagogy,* define environmental justice as "the right of all people to share equally in the benefits bestowed by a healthy environment" and define the environment as "the places in which we live, work, play, and worship" (4). Efforts to promote environmental justice are specifically concerned with addressing the disproportionate incidence of toxification and environmental contamination in communities of the poor and/or communities of color. Grassroots environmental justice activists aim "to secure for those

affected the right to live unthreatened by the risks posed by environmental degradation and contamination and to afford equal access to natural resources that sustain life and culture" (4). Environmental justice movements around the world call attention to the ways that the disparate distribution of wealth and power often leads to corollary social upheaval and the unequal distribution of environmental degradation and/or toxicity. Such groups have pushed mainstream environmental movements to become more aware of issues related to race, class, and gender, among others, and opened social justice movements to consider the significance of ecological integrity to a community's well-being (5). In 1991 at the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit held in Washington DC, participants put forth a multi-point statement, which is widely circulated and available for use in the classroom, that focuses on environmental concerns as a matter of social justice and community organizing and that has been largely integrated into scholarly and activist thinking in ecocriticism and ecocomposition (Buell 114–21; Dobrin and Weisser 5). These points might offer useful topics for inquiry in classroom and community projects such as those advocated by Jessica Singer in *Stirring Up Justice: Writing and Reading to Change the World.*

A strong thread within the environmental justice movement is the use of expressive arts "to transform toxic landscapes, to voice community experiences of environmental racism, and to imaginatively convey the issues at stake in environmental justice struggles" (Adamson, Evans, and Stein 9). Community-based art and writing projects that might be taken up through interdisciplinary collaborations include production of environmental art and poetry in community-based settings. Environmental art is "situated in urban spaces and produced by marginalized communities, [and] challenges the boundaries and hierarchies traditionally defining the culture as represented by those in power" (Di Chiro 284–85). Students might be asked to respond visually and verbally to questions such as, What counts as "green"? Where is the "environment" located? What are we trying to "sustain" and for whom? Artistic images that are used to transform a community landscape from "an industrial waste zone" to a thing of beauty and meditation helps students to challenge "the paralyzing stereotypes of inner-city dwellers as, at best, unconcerned and unproductive, and, at worst, menacing and destructive" (Adamson, Evans, and Stein 11). By linking art, poetry, and "greening," students demonstrate how the process enables them to see through "artist's eyes" to transform their environment, and in the words of one young boy, as Giovanna Di Chiro reports, "brings what's beautiful inside, out for everyone to see" (285).

War as an Environmental Concern

One of the worst causes of environmental degradation is war. War results in horrid toxification and destruction of landscapes and natural resources, in addition to the toll it takes on the lives of humans and other living things. In the age of nuclear, chemical, and biological warfare, its toxic effects are far-reaching. We are all downwinders. We all live downstream.

Teachers might explore fiction and literature of war for the devastating effects wars have had on the environment. Also, students could be encouraged to explore current wars for their effects on local citizens and communities and the long-lasting environmental and humanitarian effects of war and weapons proliferation. Teachers might also look to the many excellent classroom ideas presented for promoting peace in Virginia Monseau's *A Curriculum of Peace: Selected Essays from* English Journal, Mary Rose O'Reilley's *The Peaceable Classroom,* Riane Tennenhaus Eisler and Ron Miller's *Education for a Culture of Peace,* and Chris Weber's *Nurturing the Peacemakers in Our Students: A Guide to Writing and Speaking Out about Issues of War and Peace,* among many others for learning antidotes to cultures of violence and war.

The ultimate question we must ask in green(ing) English, in attempting to save the world, is, "How might we live peacefully and humanely with each other, with the whole of life?" It is, at its root, a question that is answered, I think, by learning to love. How do we cultivate with students a sense of love for all of life that begins in our local communities, on our home ground, but which also might extend beyond national boundaries to embrace the whole of that lovely planet upon which we live?

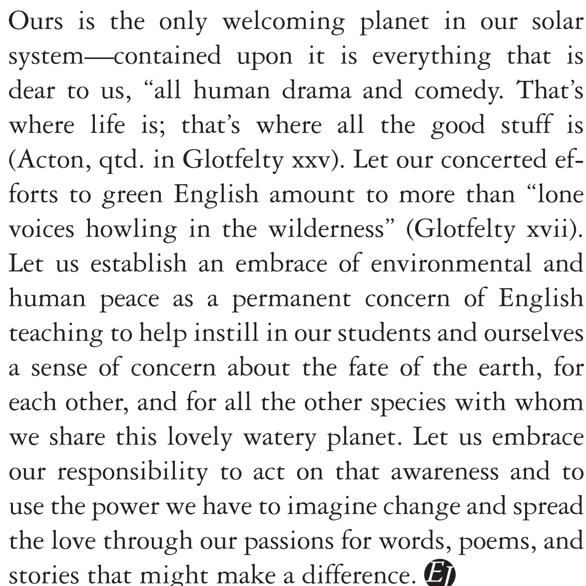
To answer that question, I draw from Kathleen Dean Moore, director of the Spring Creek

Project for Ideas, Nature, and the Written Word at Oregon State University, who writes that

> To love—a person and a place—means at least this: 1) To want to be near it, physically. 2) To want to know everything about it—its story, its moods, what it looks like by moonlight. 3) To rejoice in the fact of it. 4) To fear its loss, and grieve for its injuries. 5) To protect it—fiercely, mindlessly, futilely, and maybe tragically, but to be helpless to do otherwise. 6) To be transformed in its presence—lifted, lighter on your feet, transparent, open to everything beautiful and new. 7) To want to be joined with it, taken in by it, lost in it. 8) To want the best for it. 9) Desperately. (qtd. in Pelo 32)

Ann Pelo offers these principles as a means to cultivate such a love for place and humanity with our students: "Walk the land, learn the names, embrace sensuality, explore new perspectives, learn the stories, tell the stories" (32). These are the foundational concerns of English teaching in its broadest sense.

Embracing Environment



Ours is the only welcoming planet in our solar system—contained upon it is everything that is dear to us, "all human drama and comedy. That's where life is; that's where all the good stuff is (Acton, qtd. in Glotfelty xxv). Let our concerted efforts to green English amount to more than "lone voices howling in the wilderness" (Glotfelty xvii). Let us establish an embrace of environmental and human peace as a permanent concern of English teaching to help instill in our students and ourselves a sense of concern about the fate of the earth, for each other, and for all the other species with whom we share this lovely watery planet. Let us embrace our responsibility to act on that awareness and to use the power we have to imagine change and spread the love through our passions for words, poems, and stories that might make a difference. *EJ*

Notes

1. "Ecocentric" is an attitude that posits a "world that is an intrinsically dynamic, interconnected web of relations with no absolute dividing lines between the living and nonliving, animate and the inanimate" (Eckersley, qtd. in Buell 137).

2. Eliot Wigginton (born Brooks Eliot Wigginton on November 9, 1942) is an American oral historian, folklorist, writer and former educator. He is most widely known for his *Foxfire* books series, twelve volumes in all, consisting of field reports by high school students from Rabun County, Georgia.

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