

Teaching expressive writing for ecological understanding: An ecocritical look at student-authored nonfiction narratives

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ABSTRACT

One way to approach writing about environment and ecology is to consider how writing as a medium in adult education can enhance “ecological understanding.” I define ecological understanding as an awareness of the natural, nonhuman world and the human place in it. My ecocritical research examines the expressive nonfiction by one undergraduate-level former student through Buell’s (1995) four criteria of what makes an environmental text (p. 7) alongside his notion of “a mature environmental aesthetic” (p. 32).

My first finding is that the student text can be said to meet Buell’s criteria. My second finding is that these texts meet this criteria in part due to a naïve narrator perspective as a way of knowing environmental and ecological topics. The voice of the environmentalist is not necessarily best for generating convincing environmental writing. Righteousness, even expertise, can invade the psychic space necessary for readers to move into, space that should be free of judgment. I define psychic space as that which is left off the page in yet influences how readers experience the text.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to look for evidence of “ecological understanding” in a student-authored nonfiction narrative through an ecocritical lens. The broader purposes are to explore what ecological understanding might entail and to know more about teaching writing about environment and ecology in an adult learning setting. In so doing, I will also explore the effectiveness of the method of inquiry itself.

Theoretical Framework

I define ecological understanding broadly as awareness of the natural, nonhuman world and the human place in it, and place it as a pedagogical goal in teaching writing about environment and ecology. The human/nonhuman dichotomy appears again and again in current ecological literature. Works such as Vaillant’s *The Golden Spruce* (2005),

Diamond’s *Collapse* (2005), French’s *Zoo Story* (2010) and Vaillant’s *The Tiger* (2010) come to mind. In each of these, small up-close journeys tell the stories of humanness in the wild and wildness in the human. Orion Magazine, a leading publication that operates with the tagline, “Nature/Culture/Place,” awards the Orion Book Award annually “to a book that addresses the human relationship with the natural world in a fresh, thought provoking, and engaging manner” (2013, “Announcing”).

Since I am ostensibly looking at the production of environmental texts in the writing classroom, Lawrence Buell’s (1995) four criteria of what makes an environmental text serves to be particularly relevant to this inquiry (p. 7):

1. The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history.
2. The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest.
3. Human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation.
4. Some sense of the environment as process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text.

Buell is an ecocritic. “Ecocritics,” writes Glotfelty (“What is”), “encourage others to think seriously about the relationship of humans to nature, about the ethical and aesthetic dilemmas posed by the environmental crisis, and about how language and literature transmit values with profound ecological implications.”

Methodology

One approach to looking for evidence of ecological understanding is to take students’ finished texts written for my

upper-year Writing about Environment and Ecology class and analyze them according to criteria.

Here I examine an expressive piece by a student chosen through purposive sampling. I employ this strategy with the view of potential participant selection “as a series of strategic choices about with whom, where and how to do... research” (Palys, 2008). Having completed teaching this student, I begin with a good sense of their progress and breakthroughs, reflections and feedback. Beyond mere classroom interaction, we have met in writing conferences, which over a term often consists of two to three hours spent in one-on-one discussions. I have sought the student’s participation only after they had received their final grade. I have published the story in the first edition of the course text.

The student had completed an expressive writing prerequisite course prior to enrolling in the advanced writing course. The first course includes the following features: a text comprised of student-authored work, a portfolio system of assignments that encourages ongoing revision, the opportunity for regular writing conferences with the instructor, self-directed small group editing meetings which occur outside of class time and, in nearly every class, a workshop during which one student reads. The advanced course employs all of these features and adds research methods to the mix. In order to build upon what students have already learned, I began by assigning an expressive piece, describing its purpose to students as to explore who you are in terms of your relationship with the natural world (i.e. the non-human world). This may include writing about the outdoors, times when you learned about natural science and/or environmental issues and times when you encountered ecologically-minded people in your life.

Yun Ma: The Natural Observer

The piece I look at is “Mom’s Backyard Garden” by Yun Ma. Ma wrote the story of a daughter observing her mother’s pleasure in de-stressing through tending her backyard vegetable garden. Due to space limitations, I did not include the full pieces here.

Yun Ma’s “Mom’s Backyard Garden” (2011) rings true to most, if not all of Buell’s criteria. Several of the criteria, such as nature (i.e. the garden) as process, do not require an overly liberal interpretation to fit. The vignette structure of the piece itself speaks to this. Ma lets us observe the garden in different seasons. She wisely starts the piece showing the bounty of her mother’s hobby, hooking us with her mother’s excitement. Ma then takes us back to the time before the garden existed, to when it was a vision.

Mom walks on the grass and approaches the platform. She examines the soil plots. Dark brown soil lumps, weeds and pebbles pepper the soil. I stare at the apple tree and the raised platform. If we take away the apple tree and the raised soil plots and mow the grass, we could build a swimming pool. (p. 62)

The child’s vision for the backyard alongside the mother’s works well. We hear the narrator later state, “I hate gardening” (p. 63). The garden takes shape, the child matures and the narrator finds herself an observer, at times coming across almost as if there is nothing else to do but pay attention. The season-ending imagery, in tandem with the vignette structure of the story, suggests renewal, circularity.

Leftover dried-up green beans blacken on the pavement beside row two. Naked wooden bean poles stick out from the soil. The apple tree bears no apples and no leaves. Mom’s backyard garden waits for next year. (p. 65)

If we care to see human history implicated in natural history in terms of food, particularly quality of food, we can take the leap that the piece leans in the direction of Buell’s first criterion. The excitement of the harvest in the first three paragraphs showcase Ma’s mother’s excitement in feeding her family a fresh return of green beans that will add to or maintain good health.

I stand in the kitchen and the screen door slides open. Mom takes off her gardening shoes, an old pair of running shoes caked in dried dirt. In her hands, she carries a basket of green beans. “Yun, come here.” Mom walks into the kitchen and places the basket on the island counter. “Look. Look.”

I walk over to the island counter and glance down. Strands of flat beans and stubby beans overflow the opening of the basket.

“All organic.” Mom beams. (p. 61)

If we see human health as tied to natural history – in the sense that we take Thomas Berry’s mantra that “You can’t have well humans on a sick planet,” (Webb, 2003, p. 2) – we might see Ma’s story, through its detail, fulfils Buell’s first criterion. This part of the story serves as a signpost in this direction, meeting Buell’s key words that the nonhuman environment “begins to suggest” – i.e. through eating healthfully, especially organic produce grown by our mother’s hands – the implication of human history in natural history. The text need not centre on this concept, but may instead merely lean.

Taken as a whole, with the life-death feel of the piece, we see the cycle of a garden alongside the position of the child growing aware of time. The very stance of Ma’s narrator as an outsider really is the essence of the story. The psychic space – that which is left off the page in yet influences how we experience the story – almost seems to contain the underlying question: Will I be like mom when I reach her age? The history of this particular family, told in this particular story, tends toward suggesting that the legacy of the human resides in the treatment of the natural world. Stewardship is the concept brought to life in the narrative.

Human accountability to the environment can be seen in the mother’s mention of compost. Whether or not composting helps stop global warming – this lightness helps the

text – the mother saying so to her daughter aims to situate small actions in terms of greater cumulative global benefits. Nonetheless, the best instance of human accountability to the environment, by far, is the scene with the sparrow.

Once, Mom forgot to stick one side of the wire covering back into the soil. A sparrow snuck under and could not get out. Mom and I stood and watched as the sparrow turned in circles and clawed against the mesh. We stared until Mom turned and walked to the toolshed. She slipped on her garden gloves, reached under the wire mesh, grabbed the sparrow, pulled it out and set it free. (p. 64)

While the scene shows human accountability, it is debatable as to if it shows the human interest not as the sole legitimate interest. The mesh exists to keep animals out to save the food for human consumption. Yet if pests spoil the food, the yield and all its benefits would not make it to the writer's plate. If we think in terms of land use, the choice to garden on land that might have been made into a pool, an undertaking with great physical and social benefits but a large ecological footprint in tow, we can come to see human accountability as an overall ethical orientation in the text. Agriculture, by implication – especially organic agriculture – requires methods of cleaving off yields for human use and protecting them from other species' use. The sparrow scene reminds us of the sparrow's legitimacy in being there, in searching out food for itself and perhaps its family. In freeing the sparrow, Mom shows her daughter the utmost human accountability to the natural world.

Within "Mom's Backyard Garden" the observer stance points us to the realm of the possible. For Jarvis (2012), fiction "not only creates understanding and empathy with those who are different from us but also allows us to imagine alternatives to the way we live now" (p. 490). Ma's narrative – in the telling, through the use of headings, slow pacing and space between detail – might be seen to have the narrator as observer seeing such alternatives.

With "Mom's Backyard Garden", the ending does not leave the reader wondering if the narrator made any leaps and changed their lives. The piece exists as a loving account over a span of time of a place changing and becoming home – whole in the way the narrator's mother imagined her life to be because of the benefits she received and shared with her family from tending the Earth. It is *in the telling* of this tale – and in the tale as a whole, without tension, rising action, a climax, falling action and a resolution – that ecological understanding occurs. To write the piece Ma reflected, interviewed her mother and dug out pictures of the backyard garden. Writes Ma in the "About this Story" section: "Through her voice, I want to show the enjoyment Mom receives from gardening" (p. 65). It is an interesting note because the teller's voice is unmistakably the daughter's. I sense Ma simply means that she wanted to accurately portray in her piece the voice of the other. And we see her succeed in this through the contrasts hinted at that dwell in the

psychic space created in the writing, among them: the child/the parent; inside/outside; observer/doer; silence/speaker; space/place.

In sum, Ma's piece shows evidence of ecological understanding. My broad definition of ecological understanding – as awareness of the natural, nonhuman world and the human place in it – aligns closely to the first and second of Buell's criteria of what comprises an environmental text.

Findings: The Naïve Narrator

The case can be made that the story meets all four of Buell's criteria and may be considered an environmental text. The writer's care to detail, honesty, economy and voice show through in the polished work. But there is much to say just about the voice and stance of the observer in terms of the effect of the story on the reader. In an overall sense, Ma's writing engages the persona of the narrator as a naïf. Ma, as a new writer, naturally masters what Michael Pollan (2007) warns that seasoned writers can lose:

Journalists often write as people who have mastered subjects and are telling you about them. That's a real turn-off for readers. In my work I often begin as a naïf. It's a good place to start because it's a lot closer to where your reader is. Instead of starting as someone who knows the answers, you begin as someone learning about something. That's a good way to connect with readers.

Ma's reflection suggests she wrote the piece for herself and her mother. The daughter as onlooker, learner; sometimes befuddled and sometimes put off: this narrative act of honesty seemed to choose its own voice. Ma is Ma. And the humble perspective in the voice seems to jive with Jarvis's position that good imaginative writing can bring about empathy for others (the mother, the sparrow, the nonhuman) and can provide alternative ways of being in the world (the mother, the backyard space, the physical and psychological benefits of hands-on labour, the organic food bounty).

The very stance of the curious, down-to-earth narrator allows for what Buell calls "a mature environmental aesthetic" (1995, p. 32). The narrator is not trying to be something other than a good teller, a good renderer – so that the reader can feel and enjoy the pieces and enter them in their own way, without feeling pushed. The voice of "the environmentalist" is not necessarily best for generating convincing environmental writing. Righteousness, even expertise (or worse, feigned expertise), can invade the psychic space necessary for a reader to move into, space that should be free of judgment, space that allows readers to participate by making their own meaning, by making their own minds up based on the detail presented. A naïve narrator need not be overly introspective. The naiveté itself sparks invitation. Thus, the voice of the naïve narrator as a way of knowing environmental topics can bring ecological understanding in a palatable, participatory way to readers. This aspiration echoes cultural historian Thomas Berry's ecological thinking, that:

... every being has its own spontaneities that arise from the depths of its own being. These spontaneities express the inner value of each being in such a manner that we must say of the universe that it is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects. (1999, p. 82)

Naïveté, beginner's mind – call it what you will – lays common ground between reader and writer, creating if you will, a communion of subjects.

Reflection

In my definition of ecological understanding, “an awareness” presents the most slippery part of the definition since it implies trying to mark that such awareness has occurred within the life of the writer. The problem with any critical literary analysis is that it focuses on the self, constructed through writing. We cannot extrapolate that self with the true self of the writer, since it is a construct. It might be true that the writer took great care to honestly portray their awareness, but we will never know for certain in an absolute sense if their doing so and saying so is not a charade. An analysis such as we have here shows what lives on the page, not in the world. It may be a good idea to accompany an analysis such as this with interviews of the writers about their writing and their writing processes.

Conducting this analysis has led me to other questions:

- How does the expressive/narrative form serve the production of knowledge?
- How do the voice and persona of the narrator affect this knowledge?
- What should writing teachers keep in mind around these issues?

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