

Teaching Land as an Extension of Self: The Role of Ecopsychology in Disrupting Capitalist Narratives of Land and Resource Exploitation

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"SYCAMORE," BY MALCOM MCGREGOR

I used to think the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change. I thought that with 30 years of good science we could address those problems. But I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy...and to deal with those we need a spiritual and cultural transformation—and we scientists don't know how to do that.

- Gus Speth

n the first day of ENG 3100J, I did the expected first. The students and I flipped through the syllabus detailing the assigned readings, the required textbook list, and the breakdown of the course's grading structure. I asked for guestions and received blank stares in return. Students, most of them juniors or seniors in their undergraduate programs, introduced themselves and their various intended majors: one plant biology, a handful of business, more than a few engineering, a designyour-own major, and a handful of social sciences majors peppered with attached certificates. I also droned through a conventional, obligatory introduction, listing my credentials, my work in the field, and my goals for the semester insofar as developing their composition skills were concerned. Then, we left the realm of the conventional and springboarded into my real objectives for the semester.

With half of the class time left, I told the students to pack up their things, syllabuses and textbooks away, and to meet me under the sycamore tree on the green. I delayed packing my things, rummaging in my bag like I'd misplaced my favorite highlighter. "Go on," I said, "I'll be right there." I wanted to see if the students could identify *which tree* was the sycamore. There were only two among the towering oaks and maples on the small college green, a grass carpeted square criss-crossed with sidewalks and bordered by buildings such as our English hall. Although almost every student grew up in the midwest, most raised in this very state, I bet that my group of young adults would have no idea which tree was the sycamore. I was right.

When I emerged from the large brick building, I could see the gaggle of students pointing at the canopy laced above their heads, discussing, and looking around with urgency. A few had attempted to Google the solution. I walked up and smiled, directed them to the sycamore and their first real lesson in ENG 3100J. "This is a sycamore," I said, touching the silvery flaking bark of my giant, reaching friend. "I want you all to stand in a circle, around the trunk, and just look at the tree and observe while I set a timer for two minutes. Your only job is to observe the tree. Note in your mind every detail you can about it. If your mind starts to wander, bring it back to your eyes, to the tree, and notice something else."

The two minutes stretched painfully for the students. A few looked uncertainly around them, behind them, before catching themselves and looking back at the tree. One student stepped back to observe the protruding roots. Another student, his neck stretched to see the place where the bark turns smooth and bone white, sighed audibly as his shoulders relaxed.

At the end of the two minutes, I asked the students to quietly discuss their detailed observations with the person standing next to them. Then, I invited them to sit in a circle next to the tree, backs to one another and bodies facing out at the green. I invited them to close their eyes, and I led the students through Joanna Macy's (1998) "Opening through Breath, Body, Sound, and Silence," an exercise she designs as an introduction to the work of processing environmental despair to reawaken and connect to our deep love for the planet (p. 83-85). "First, I'd like to invite you to feel down through your body to where your legs meet the earth. Put your hands in the grass if you like, feeling the connection between your skin and the ground below. If a bug crawls over you, or a fly lands on you, try to observe what it feels like instead of instinctually swatting it away. Take a few deep breaths; what does the air smell like? What does the air feel like as the wind touches your skin? For a few moments, hold your attention on the place where the air moves across your body. Now, turn your ears outward, listening for the sounds of nature above the human sounds. What can you hear?" After five more minutes of listening, feeling, grounding, I asked the students to check in with their breathing, the beating of their own hearts. Had they noticed they feel more calm? More relaxed and focused? With their eyes still closed, I said to the students, "For centuries, for millennia, people have told stories and written books and articles trying to explain the connection humans have with the natural world: the connection you are feeling right now. For some writers, this connection with the Earth is love, biophilia. A love of the Earth. In this class, we will read these writers and others, and we will write about our own feelings of connection and our own observations of the Earth. Welcome to 3100J, Writing about Sustainability."

Biophilia

"Most of us view nature (to borrow a phrase from Thomas Berry) as a collection of objects rather than a communion of subjects, as resources rather than relatives. Sustainability will require that we re-envision the humannature relationship and develop a strong sense of compassion with the nonhuman world" (Sampson, 2012, P. 24).

While environmentalism and eco- as a prefix attached to other disciplines and forms of academic inquiry, such as ecocriticism in the literary tradition, are certainly not new, ecopsychology takes the radical, holistic position that views nature and culture as one, without separation either physical or philosophical. Ecopsychology, a multi-dimensional field of study investigating the human-nature relationship, effectively eliminates all bifurcations of the world into culture and nature. Ecocriticism and ecofeminism preserve the nature-culture dichotomy, seeking to investigate the representation of nature in language, rhetoric, and artifacts of culture, and "also how such representations reflect and shape real-world environmental practices" (Bergthaller, 2015, p. 6). In these disciplines, "the starting point for the ecocritic is that there really is an unprecedented global environmental crisis, and that this crisis poses some of the great political and cultural questions of our time" (Kerridge, 1998, p. 5). In these traditions, the unit of investigation is

the cultural artifact: the representation of the relationship of humans to nature and the consequent sense-making humans do as a result of the arrangements of those representations. Cohen (2004), in his essay "Blues in the Green: Ecocriticism Under Critique" says "ecocriticism focuses on literary (and artistic) expression of human experience primarily in a naturally and consequently in a culturally shaped world: the joys of abundance, sorrows of deprivation, hopes for harmonious existence, and fears of loss and disaster" (p. 10). While Cohen's (2004) article also confronted the challenge of the first wave of ecocritics to adapt the school of critique to respond to the influences of postmodern feminist critique, post-colonialism, and what would become, later, post-human critiques of the canon of "nature writing" and its activist orientations, the aims of ecocritism stayed focused on "decomposing texts into their constituent parts" as the process of understanding (p. 30). Like so many activities sanctioned by the academy, ecocriticism, environmentalism, and the "hard sciences" that lead us to activism still glorify the logical mind and ignore the subjective, feeling body as a place of knowing and connection. This fragmentation and study of disconnected artifacts we conceptualize as apart from ourselves falls short of the radical starting point of ecopsychology. In ecopsychology, the unit of study, critique, and investigation is the self as an extension of the Earth. The self is nature and culture is another manifestation of one Gaia, one natural organism. Nature, then, is not a place separate from industrialized society where one can escape to find metaphoric teachings in the processes of nature's cycles as Thoreau sought at Walden. Nature is not Muir's wildness to save or a substitute for God. Nature is not a resource or a gift or under our jurisdiction.

Ecopsychology rests on the Biophilia hypothesis. The Biophilia hypothesis, developed by Harvard zoologist E.O.Wilson (1984), posits that humans have the innate predisposition to connect emotionally with nonhuman, living organisms (Rozak, 1995; Sampson, 2012). More recently, evolutionary biologist Scott Donald Sampson (2012) refined the Biophilia hypothesis to theorize that natural selection favored Homo sapiens who formed place-specific affective bonds with local nonhuman environment (p. 27). Sampson (2012) uses the term "topophilia" to describe the innate affective bonds humans form with local place (p. 25). Sampson (2012) describes the topophilia hypothesis: "humans possess an innate bias to bond with local place, including both living and nonliving components" and "topophilia is an evolutionary adaptation that facilitated the ability of humans to live in a diverse range of settings, each characterized by its own unique suite of organisms, landforms, and ecological relationships" (p. 25-27). To Sampson, then, and other ecopsychologists, the love of the Earth, the expansive feeling of bonding with living and non living organisms is not a woo-woo feeling shared by treehugging hippies and nature writers, but an evolutionarybased characteristic buried deep in every man, woman, and child on the planet.

Ecopsychologists across the discipline agree, our current industrialized, capitalist society does not honor or

nurture our fundamental biophilia and topophilia (Sampson, 2012; Glendinning, 1995; Hillman, 1995; Metzner, 1995; Macy, 1995; Brown & Macey 1998; Shepard, 1995; Louvre, 2008). Techno-addiction lures more and more children and adults inside to the conditioned air of McMansions where smart homes and smart appliances automatically order groceries to be delivered by Amazon, separating humans farther and farther away from natural spaces, the dirt from which their food grows, and all of the psychological benefits communion with nature offers (Louvre, 2008; hooks, 2008). Ecopsychologists have warned for decades: the farther away humans separate themselves from nature, the more we neglect our topophilia, the more mentally and physically ill we become (Barrows, 1995; Conn, 1995; Glendinning, 1995; Hillman, 1995; Metzner, 1995; Macy, 1995; Shepard, 1995; Louvre, 2008; Fisher, 2012). Our current industrialized society has therefore created not only an ecocrisis, but an "internal crisis of mind" (p. 24) because our industrialized way of life cleaves topophilia from human's everyday existence. Further, as a result of failing to honor or create a society which nurtures our fundamental Biophilia and Topophilia, ecopsychologists argue that technoaddiction and the globalization of the Western mind-body split has created an epidemic of neuroses arising from our failure to mature as holistic beings (Shepard, 1995; Glendinning, 1995).

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Capitalism, of course, exacerbates the collective madness we experience as globalization and the need for consistent brand recognition standardizes one city to the next, one country to the next. If we have the refined capacity for forming bonds with the specifics of a locality, yet every place looks the same, then no "place" is home. Captured in capitalism's thrall to consume, we perceive our natural resources as "other," and as cosmic homesickness sets in, our ability to attend to the details of local landscape distort and dissolve into mental illnesses and ontological crisis.

When A Tree Falls in The Forest, It's The Same As Losing an Arm

I deliberately set out to disrupt traditional pedagogical approaches while teaching the junior composition course, Writing about Sustainability. Traditional pedagogy demands teachers keep quantifiable course outcomes in mind for all assignments, however limited they may be. For this class, I kept traditional course outcomes secondary to the real outcome I held for my students: I wanted them to develop "A Psyche the Size of the Earth," an understanding that the self cannot be extricated from the nonhuman world (Hillman, 1995). Because Biophilia leads to the broadened identity of the self to include "identification with all beings, even with the biosphere as a whole," I spent the first quarter of the class using activities and readings to connect students to their own sense of Biophilia (Conn, 1995, p. 163). To cultivate an understanding and direct experience of interconnectedness with nature, I assigned students weekly nature journals. For this ongoing assignment, students chose one place they could "observe...with love in [their] heart[s]...look[ing] closely and steadily at nature, and not[ing] the individual features of tree and rock and field" (Burroughs, 2008, p. 150). They returned to this place at least once weekly, at different times and in different weather, to observe closely, document changes, and capture their observations on paper in whatever writing or multimodal expression seemed fitting. In class, we examined the writing of great observers like Muir, Burroughs, Austin, and Dillard.

I watched students struggle to capture in writing the felt sense of awe and expansion they experienced while washing their senses in the complex natural spaces near campus. One student specifically agonized over the futility of her writing skills to capture the pulse-quickening, joyful surprise of observing a fox wander through her "place" while she sat mindfully watching one day. The students' biophilia strengthened as they practiced observing and noticing the ways in which the feelings in their own bodies responded as the nonhuman landscape shifted around them. No longer spatially isolated from the nonhumanized world (Metzner, 1995, p. 57), the students wrote about "interaction patterns": the core experiences humans have when interacting with nature that catalyze deeply meaningful feelings and produce fundamental shifts in perception (Kahn, Ruckert, and Hasbach, 2017, p. 55). My radical course outcome, not sanctioned by the university, in the first quarter of my class was for all students to have an experience of awe, joy, and wonder similar to the student who saw the fox: an experience of "recognizing and being recognized by a nonhuman other" in its own habitat, or the experience of "being under the night sky" through "interacting with the periodicity of nature," experiences which introduce and expand the idea of radical oneness (Kahn, Ruckert, and Hasbach, 2017, p. 55). Without the interconnectedness, direct experience of argue ecopsychologists and evolutionary biologists alike, humans devolve into comatose, fragmented shells either denying their individual impact on other beings or descending into madness.

During the middle of the course, I sought to accomplish two objectives. First, we would work on being able to name the flora and fauna in the places the students had chosen for their journaling. Second, we would write about our experiences with nonhuman nature past and present, and try to imagine ourselves "in a kinship relationship" (Sampson, 2012, p. 35) inside nature instead of separate from or disconnected from it (p. 45). To accomplish these objectives, I continued what I started on the first day of class; we tore down the impedences of the classroom walls and placed our class in "close physical contact with wild things and wild places" (Albrecht, p. 250). I sought mentors for my students across other disciplines in the university, and those mentors took us on class field trips to the greenhouse, the woods, to visit the non-native plants which sculpt the the campus so we could begin to name, notice, and appreciate the nonhuman "others" we walk with and live beside every day. These mentors taught the students to read nature as text and understand themselves as one small element of that text.

With a firm beginning of biophilia and the work of topophilia ignited, I invited the students to consider the relationship of their development and identity to the land. Before we turned the pen toward ourselves, we studied Leslie Marmon Silko, Aldo Leopold's serious Land Ethic, and Edward Abbey's hilarious misanthropy. We examined not just the way in which the authors used the land as a metaphor for life lessons or the writer's representation of relationship to the land, but the moments in the text where the "I" or writer's personal identity and the identity of the Land became one and the same. We honored Camille T. Dungy's (2011) experiences in "Tales From a Black Girl on Fire, or Why I Hate to Walk Outside and See Things Burning," which brought up conversations of deep time and embodiment. We soaked in the disruptive position bell hooks (2011) takes in "earthbound on solid ground." hooks reclaimed for us the spirit of "backwoods folks" and the relationship of "black folks" to the earth; the earth whose power and rights can never be taken away by a white master (p. 184-187). hooks reminded us that, "when we are forgetful and participate in the destruction and exploitation of the dark earth, we collude with the domination of the earth's dark people, both here and globally" (p. 187), so the class sought a new language of expression to name, identify, and describe our bonds with the earth.

Using these texts as our guides, I asked the students to write an ecobiography: an essay where students described a moment from their life story where it was impossible for them to see where "Nature ends and the Self begins: ego and eco are inextricably intertwined" (Farr and Snyder, 1996, p. 203). The ecobiography is based on the dynamic feminine: those features devalued and despised by patriarchy, which encourage direct sensory experiences, open attention to increasing complexity and beauty, and the nonrational (Gomes and Kanner, 1995, p. 119). The dynamic feminine stands as the antithesis of the current narrative of domination and human-centric superiority. For the ecobiography, students reflected on a time from their lives where they were witness to ecological changes in the environment or landscape, where they were humble companions to the chaotic, wild, mysterious sensate landscape (Short, 2019). The ecobiography used writing as a means of developing what Anita Barrows (1995) calls the "ecological self" (p. 107): the self that embraces nature as a teacher, mentor, and friend, encouraging the loosening of the boundaries of "self" and the feeling of "me" to include the whole wide world (Barrows, 1995, p. 110).

The students uncovered deep layers of pain and emotion with these ecobiographies. One student, studying engineering, wrote delicately about the untamed wildflower field at the edge of his stucco, suburban neighborhood. The field, edged with a thin line of trees, stretched to a small creek, where he spent many boyhood days creating imaginary worlds with the rocks and the plants he would collect. This land became a haven for him, sheltering and holding his grief when his parents were processing a painful divorce. He knew this land as a trusted friend and confidant. and wrote about the complete sense of devastation he felt when he came home from school one day to find bulldozers savaging the place he loved. What's more, the boy had no way of understanding the pain he felt at the sight of the bulldozers "developing the land." His father told him it would increase the value of their house to extend the neighborhood by building even bigger houses at the end of the street. The boy buried his pain so deep that he went to work for a construction company as his summer job in college where all day long, he watched bulldozers and backhoes clumsily tear through the earth. Through his ecobiography he expressed distress and conflict about his career path, a wondering about the ways in which his field could work to reconcile the needs of humans with the sovereignty of the nonhuman. Through acknowledging his ecological self and integrating it as an innate, central part of his identity and past, his relationship to his work, to human narratives of land as resource, have changed.

Ecopsychology as Radical Approach

In the evaluations at the end of the course, an overwhelming theme emerged. One student said that prior to the course she was nervous about taking the course because she expected the readings for the course would all be specifically aimed to create fear through dire statistics about climate change, overpopulation, and waste. She said that she already suffered from depression and knew she couldn't handle the internal pain she would experience through reading an onslaught of texts showing the earth suffering, the earth hurting from the actions of humans. These texts take the rhetorical approach of using the ethos of fear and panic and the logos of overwhelming numbers as a motivator toward actions. Similar to the approaches of traditional environmental pedagogy, many contemporary environmental writers and environmental activists also unintentionally create despair and apathy through shock and awe campaigns of fear or blame; images and statistics meant to communicate urgency and the need to act or donate immediately to solve the eco crisis actually create Ecoanxiety, "nonspecific worry about our relationship to support environments in the 21st century" (Albrecht, 2014, p. 257) and lead to ecoparalysis, "the inability to meaningfully respond to the climatic and ecological challenges that face us" (Albrecht, 2014, p. 257).

The majority of students in the class echoed this young woman's sentiment; these students are aware of the environmental disasters facing our time, but are forced into apathy or numbness because they have no tools to process or framework to understand the very personal sense of loss welling inside them. In class, when we needed coping mechanisms to deal with our sense of loss in the face of total ecological destruction, we sought solace through writers such as Joanna Macy to process our *somaterratic illness* (Sampson, 2012, p. 36).

The latin root of education means "to lead out." In order to create curriculum and learning spaces that serve to draw out students' Biophilia and Topophilia, we must be radical in our approach to imagining what school should look like. Ecopsychology is a radical discipline which encourages us to imagine and "commit ourselves...to a different society altogether" (Fisher, 2012, p. 80) by examining the roots of the problem to find the cause and ripping them out altogether. To make superficial changes to education by merely encouraging more isolated, clinical study of nature will not be enough to combat ecoparalysis and insidious myopic logic; we must completely remove the impedences of the physical classroom space and shift the concept of child development to not just include development of the intellect or the human centered social-emotional development. We must begin with and center educational philosophy and practice on ecosocialization and the students' somaterric and pschoterratic well being (p. 241-259). Ecopedagogy, with development of the ecological self at the center, would teach all students what Native American Shamanism seeks to impart: Health in all aspects "equals balanced relationships with all living things" (Gray, 1995, p. 173). Under this Ecopedagogy, the fragmented pieces of society are put back together again, and the control of technology is relegated to its proper place as an addendum to human life instead of its current disordered place as the centerpiece of all life. Instead, with this Ecopedagogy, love for life and its component parts serves as the center of learning and growing.

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To facilitate these new values and stages in marking the development of the ecological self, we would turn to indigenous ways of knowing. As part of our deep time recollections of the histories of local places, we would invite those indigenous and first nations people to teach us the practices lost to European imperialism. Ecopedagogy would "draw out" the ancient wisdom of place, using indigenous practices to remid humans that just as the infant is born into a social context, it is born and grows in an ecological context to which it is dependent. Anita Barrows (1995) describes a Hopi ritual where the mother presents the child, after a period of time, to the earth saying to the east and the rising sun, "This is your child" (p. 102). This ritual situates the new human's place beyond the human community into the Earth community. Ecopedagogy would ask indigenous peoples to guide in developing curriculum that follows practices such as the naming of totem animals for young children, where any

harm or benefit to the totem animal is perceived as harm or benefit to the self. For adolescents, rituals of solo wilderness treks as rites of passage, would allow students to demonstrate their individual ability to live within and to understand nature. Further, adolescents and university students would be encouraged to develop more than just the executive functioning of abstract thought; through practices such as indigenous shamanism, students would learn to value and access non linear, non rational ways to problem solve (Gray, 1995, p. 174).

Ecopedagogy puts the relationship of humans to the earth at the center of learning, instead of the current practice of humans' relationship to technology (STEM) or humans' relationship to other humans (Liberal Arts) at the center. When we remove the impedences of walls and developmental learning standards, and bring learning back into the wild, with a new ecologically based vision for education, we radically alter our understanding of our place in the universe, of our own identity, and of our responsibility to the rest of the extra-human world.

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