

Giving a Voice to Nature in the Postmodern Composition Classroom: Or, What Can Ecofeminist Standpoint Theory and Ecocriticism/Ecocomposition Teach At-Risk Students?

Introduction—Why Ecofeminist Eco-Composition?

MY TURN TOWARD A POSTMODERN FEMINIST ECO-COMPOSITION sprung from experiences teaching two populations of at-risk students at an open-admissions college in Oklahoma: Native Americans and returning nontraditional women students. Students at Southeastern Oklahoma State University entered from a variety of backgrounds—"homes" according to ecologists, who translate ecology as the study of homes. Admission requirements differ according to categories aligning with these different "homes," from traditional first-year to non-traditional first-year, transfer, returning, non-degree seeking, and concurrent students. Although an ACT requirement is included in the criteria for each category, all students also have the option to take and pass remedial courses to fulfill testing or GPA requirements. During my tenure there, at least a third of the students were Native American, mainly Choctaw and primarily assimilated into mainstream Euro-American culture. At least a quarter of the students were nontraditional women who were returning to college after marriage and families, usually after divorces in this buckle of the Bible belt. Most of them came to Southeastern with a will to learn but a limited repertoire of knowledge on which to draw. They also came with a desire to change their situation and, to a certain extent, that of other Native Americans and/or exploited women around them.

Many students at Southeastern enroll in classes to find a new beginning and overcome various forms of oppression. All of these students benefit from an approach to composition instruction that encourages coming to voice, giving an activist edge to composition instruction, helping involve students in the intersections of discourses that compete within Western culture and helping them situate themselves in order to find ways to exercise agency with movements that facilitate voice and resist those forces that take voice away.

Although postmodernism and ecocomposition are sometimes seen as contradictory because postmodernism is constructed as passive theorizing rather than activism, I believe composition and literacy courses that take a postmodern feminist eco-composition approach will show students that postmodern theory need not silence nature. Nor will it silence students who study it; it may even lend them a more powerful voice. Combining a postmodern feminist standpoint theory with ecocriticism and ecocomposition theory in the classroom will blur interdisciplinary boundaries and break down binaries grounded in Enlightenment thought, as well. Integrating such a feminist ecocritical approach in writing classes also helps the at-risk student gain a sense of voice that may transfer to not only more active reading and writing but to activism.

What is Postmodern Ecofeminist Composition?

The 1995 publication *Reinventing Nature? Responses to Postmodern Deconstruction* and the many articles from ecocritics responding to the debate about postmodernism—even post-postmodernism—and its impact on nature and the natural world make clear that “Postmodern Natures,” views of nature that suggest its representation is relative, are often seen as problematic. In *Reinventing Nature?* the majority of the articles suggest instead that we should fear the consequences of viewing nature through a postmodern lens. Gary Lease’s introduction, for example, discusses two trends in ecocritical studies: “the first trend is the recognition that the forces of cultural construction play a much greater role in forming our understanding of nature than has been admitted” (7), but Lease advocates the second trend, “the acknowledgement of the still strong defense of nature as a realm that is autonomous and valuable in its own right” (7). Donald Worster’s “Nature and the Disorder of History,” asserts that postmodern historians are excessively relativistic and that they distort reality (67-8). N. Katherine Hayle’s “Searching for Common Ground” argues for “strong objectivity” (61) rather than the relativism of radical postmodernism and social constructionist views. And Stephen R. Kellert’s “Concepts of Nature East and West” suggests that “The deconstructionist position of nature—as solely a human creation based on power relationships—confuses content with underlying structure and thus ignores the formative influence of biologically based human valuation dependencies on the natural world” (104).

With these arguments in mind, viewing texts as situated, with meaning dependent on context, might silence nature according to ecocritics, since, for example, immersing perceptions of nature in their historical context would “distort reality.” In fact, any form of situatedness—viewing nature relative to history, culture, or individual perceptions—seems to be seen as problematic by many ecocritics. For these ecocritics, the consequences of viewing nature and the natural through a postmodern lens becomes frightening because such a per-

spective paralyzes the viewer, eradicating any possibility of social or environmentally conscious activism springing from the academy and the academic discourses in play in an open-admissions classroom with at-risk students.

In spite of these misgivings, however, ecocriticism also calls out for a situated and an interdisciplinary approach to reading and writing that draws on these relativist postmodern views ecocritics tend to reject. For me, joining ecocriticism and ecocomposition with postmodern feminist standpoint theories like those of Susan Hekman will help us avoid silence and paralysis and highlight the inherent interdisciplinarity of ecocriticism, especially when guided by a postmodern feminist hand. When postmodern feminists reconfigure views of liberalism with an “enlightened” view of postmodern cultural studies, nature remains active, maintains its voice—and ecocritics and ecocompositionists maintain their call to action, their ability to facilitate environmentally conscious activism from at-risk students in an Oklahoma open-admissions classroom. Native Americans will learn to argue effectively for their sover-

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eignty, for example, and nontraditional female students will gain the agency necessary to assert their own autonomy, each gaining a sense of identity that facilitates action, from writing proposals for continued tribal sovereignty and more environmentally-sound treatment of tribal lands to establishing ecofeminist book discussion and response clubs. An ecofeminist standpoint approach helps students localize exploitation, breaking down binaries between dominant and subordinate cultures and genders, interrogating “environments that affect and are affected by the production of discourse” (Dobrin 13) while adding an activist edge to the discussion.

Ecocriticism, however, no matter how “new” a form of literary criticism it may seem, did spring from the same liberal traditions as did first wave feminist approaches and early approaches set on eliminating oppression based on class and race and, to a certain extent, sexuality. Gre-

gory McNamee calls these early ecocritics, “60s survivors who, having transferred their idealism from politics to the realm of nature,” (14) teach canonical works of nature writing like Thoreau’s *Walden* and Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. John Tallmadge suggests that these early ecocritics “saw in the wilderness, with its healthy and interdependent communities, a model for just and sustainable human societies” (5). Even twenty years later, when William Rueckert coined the term ecocriticism in his seminal “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment” and delineated its definition, such liberal idealism drove Rueckert’s translation of ecology for literary application. According to Rueckert, ecocriticism “sees literature inside the context of an ecological vision in ways which restrict neither” (105). Ecocriticism draws on the ecological belief that “everything is connected to everything else.”

In his letter for the 1999 *PMLA* Forum, Patrick D. Murphy connects ecocriticism to both the classroom and the community when he demonstrates that ecocriticism as a movement “arose from the social concerns of teachers and students as have other critical movements . . . like feminism, multiculturalism, and postcolonialism” (1098). According to Murphy, “while these earlier movements are focused on extending equitable moral considerability and social justice to excluded, exploited, and oppressed peoples, ecocriticism—like the various forms of ecology on which it is invariably, although somewhat tenuously based—extends that considerability to nonhuman nature (at the same time, the relation between ecocriticism and these other movements is being developed through ecofeminism, environmental justice, and multicultural ecofeminism)” (1098). Ecofeminist standpoint theory applies broader views of ecocriticism as extending equitable considerability and social justice to nonhuman nature, to include humans’ interactions with nature on a local level. An ecofeminist standpoint approach invites marginalized constituencies like at-risk southeastern Oklahoma students to address the range of discourses that situate them in and out of school, finding a space for their own voices to work toward change.

Like the other movements Murphy describes, ecocriticism is not only activist based but interdisciplinary in context. According to Ursula Heise, ecocriticism intertwines research on literature, film and photography with work in fields like ecology, history, art history, anthropology, and philosophy (1097). And this interdisciplinarity offers ecocritics a way to move beyond the liberal roots that maintain the binary oppositions that perpetuate racist, sexist, and classist oppressions, as well as those that contribute to humans’ destruction of the natural world. Environmental philosophy, for example, provides ecocritics with a vision of what Louise Westling calls “an ecological humanism” that, as she suggests, would counter “basic notions of human superiority we inherited from Renaissance humanism” (1103) and “restore appropriate humility, absorbing the lessons of quantum physics and emphasizing cooperative participation within the community of planetary life” (1104). Westling’s defini-

tion of ecological humanism, then, moves ecocriticism ever so slightly into a postmodern realm in which the agency necessary to overcome the oppression Westling hopes to foreground—that against nature—might be arrested and demonstrates the ongoing debate between essentialist (modern) and relativist (postmodern) views of nature.

Ecocomposition and Postmodernism

This same debate between modern and postmodern views of nature drives conflicting views in ecocomposition studies. Christian Weisser and Sidney Dobrin highlight this debate in their introduction to *Ecocomposition: Theoretical and Pedagogical Approaches*. According to Weisser and Dobrin, ecocomposition began when composition specialists inquired “into scientific scholarship to inform work in their own discipline” (1). Weisser and Dobrin explain how their text “seeks to explore the connections between interdisciplinary inquiries of composition studies and ecological studies and forwards the potential for theoretical and pedagogical work in ecocomposition” (1).

In an Ecocomposition class, for example, instructors may focus on improving student writing in a variety of writing environments, with emphasis on the sense of place defined there, either essentially or in context. Weisser and Dobrin assert that

ecocomposition is an area of study which, at its core, places ecological thinking and composition in dialogue with one another in order to both consider the ecological properties of written discourse and the ways in which ecologies, environments, locations, places, and natures are discursively affected. . . . Ecocomposition is about relationships; it is about the coconstitutive existence of writing and environment; it is about the production of written discourse and the relationship of that discourse to the places it encounters.” (2)

According to Weisser and Dobrin’s “Breaking New Ground in Ecocomposition: An Introduction,” the roots of ecocomposition are found in traditional rhetoric, ecocriticism, and environmental rhetoric. All of these approaches sometimes take a cynical view of postmodern perspectives on “nature” because they are seen to hinder activism. Ecocritical approaches, especially, caution against relativism as a silencing instrument. Combining these approaches with ecofeminist standpoint theory will again provide a space for agency and activism in postmodern ecocomposition studies.

In “Writing Takes Place,” Dobrin suggests that in a class driven by ecocomposition theory, “students become critical of how those places are mapped, defined, regulated, managed through discourse so that they may identify for themselves how discourse affects and is affected by places they experience and find connection with. Nature and environment must be lived in, experienced, to see how the very discourses in which we live react to and with

those environments" (15). An ecocomposition pedagogy thus encourages political activism, public writing, and service learning, and student writing can be directed beyond the limited scope of classroom assignments to address larger, public audiences" (15).

According to Dobrin and Weisser, however, ecocompositionists take one of two approaches or may meld the two: an ecological literary approach typically couched in modernist visions of nature that focuses on responses to nature writing and real-world responses to ecological issues and organizations; and a postmodern discursive ecology approach that argues that "words, language, and writing are themselves parts of ecosystems and that when writers write they affect and are affected by environment" {"Breaking Ground" 584). The course may be linked with an environmental issues course and collaborative or webbed writing (in hypertext) may be the goal.

The essays in Weisser and Dobrin's *Ecocomposition: Theoretical and Pedagogical Approaches* highlight this bifurcation between modern and postmodern views of nature and its impact on composition studies and include chapters that address the relationship of postmodern visions of discourse to environments (see Sidney Dobrin, Anis Bawarshi, and Christian Weisser, for example) and modernist views of discourse, nature, and writing (see Randall Roorda, Derek Owens, Mark C. Long, Greta Gaard, and Edward Lotto, for example). The pieces tend to take modernist approaches in an ecocomposition class when the goal is transformation and activism in the classroom or community and postmodern approaches to discourse when the goal is extending discourse analyses to include organic and inorganic environments. In a nod toward essentialism, Edward Lotto's "Written in Its Own Season: Nature as Ground in the Postmodern World" suggests that nature can serve as grounding in a postmodern world. According to Lotto, "It can serve as a powerful authority in a world that has at least the glimmerings of an ecological ethic" (254). Anis Bawarshi, on the other hand, asserts that "genres are the rhetorical ecosystems that allow communicants to enact and reproduce various situations, social practices, relations, and identities" (71), highlighting a postmodern view of discourse as situated.

These conflicts between essential and postmodern ecocomposition views arise out of the roots of ecocomposition, with ecocritical roots tending to encourage modernist perspectives to enhance activism and sustainability and rhetorical roots tending to stimulate more postmodernist views of discourse in relation to the environment without the nod toward sustainability found in modern views. But they also spring from a need to ensure that, as Weisser and Dobrin state, "ecocomposition not become a master narrative that proselytizes ecological thinking as somehow better or more important thinking" ("Breaking New Ground in Ecocomposition: An Introduction" 9). In response to a critique of their anthology as overemphasizing activism, Weisser and Dobrin offer a disclaimer based on the work of David

Thomas Sumner: “we do not do justice to our role as teachers if our composition classroom turns into a cheering section for pet causes, environmental or other. Such a class may generate converts, or even enemies, but it will not provide students with the necessary critical writing and thinking skills to address the complexity of issues they will face at the academy and in life” (“Breaking New Ground in Ecocomposition: An Introduction” 9).

Adding a Renewed Ecofeminist Standpoint Theory to the Mix

I believe, however, that we can teach writing for a sustainable future without proselytizing or minimizing effective writing instruction. By combining postmodern views with ecofeminist standpoint theory, activism can again enter composition courses driven by rhetorical views of place, and modernist classrooms can recognize that students, discourse, and nature itself are situated, interpretive, and public—both post-process and postmodern. At-risk students in southeastern Oklahoma can benefit from such an approach because each student’s situatedness can become the focus of her or his responses. Their perspectives become validated because they read and write in relation to their own specific standpoints, their ideologies and repertoires. Native Americans and returning female students at Southeastern Oklahoma State University can, as ecocomposition scholars like Dobrin contend, examine “classroom environments, electronic environments, and textual environments since . . . they are some of the many locations in which the relationships between discourse and place are highly political and in which actual learning takes place” (13). With the addition of feminist standpoint theory, they can also apply that examination through activism, confronting mainstream populations that, in the southeastern Oklahoma context, have exploited them.

Feminist critics like Susan Hekman and Donna Haraway have aligned feminism and postmodernism in ways that preserve the agency and activism of early feminism, while solving some of the problems associated with a liberalism based on Enlightenment thought (and the binaries it perpetuates). Aligning ecocriticism and ecocomposition with postmodernism in similar ways will both eliminate silencing and repudiate some of ecocriticism’s troublesome roots, moving it in line with the interdisciplinary blurring of boundaries ecocriticism becomes when applied.

Applying theories of Foucault to ecocritical readings and ecocomposition applications, for example, would provide a way to preserve and value nature without needing to point to universals, which separate humans from the natural world. According to Hekman, “a program of political action does flee [sic] from Foucault’s work” (*Gender and Knowledge*), one in which power relations like those between humans and nature can be called into question without needing to ground them, as Hekman asserts in a more recent article, “in an

absolute, universal conception of truth and justice" ("Truth and Method" 342). Even if nature and the texts in which it is represented become historicized, they maintain a sense of voice. Writers, too, maintain voice and place when writing is seen as situated, public, and interpretive. Hekman's explanation for feminist standpoint theory draws on this juxtaposition, arguing that the theorist's "quest for truth and politics has been shaped by two central understandings: that knowledge is situated and perspectival and that there are multiple standpoints from which knowledge is produced" (342). According to Hekman, feminist standpoint theorists examine, "first, how knowledge can be situated yet 'true,' and second, how we can acknowledge difference without obviating the possibility of critique and thus a viable feminist politics" (342).

By asserting that situated knowledge can still be true and may also be critiqued, Hekman's synthesis of postmodern and feminist theories provides a space for agency, a space aligned with ecofeminist theory. Like traditional ecofeminist theory, ecofeminist standpoint theory looks at intersections between the oppression of women and the oppression of non-human nature in Western culture, but ecofeminist standpoint theory offers a way to address the reversed binaries of radical ecofeminists like Mary Daley and to put feet under postmodern ecofeminist theories like those of Carolyn Merchant.

Combining ecocriticism and ecocomposition with an ecofeminist standpoint theory provides the opportunity to give nature a voice, as well, opening up the interdisciplinarity that seems so inherent in the theory. An ecofeminist standpoint theory localizes—and makes more forceful—Patrick Murphy's proposal for an adapted dialogics that unifies ecology and feminisms. According to Murphy, "Dialogics reminds ecofeminist practitioners that every position is really a pivot by which to step and dance, to practice and develop, but not to stand or come to rest" (159). Ecofeminist standpoint theory offers a way to come to rest, so change can be made. Sandra Harding, for example, asserts that the theory allows the natural sciences to critique its sometimes-exclusionary efforts to meet the needs of dominant groups:

Standpoint projects critically engage with natural sciences in two ways. Some delineate how particular sciences, such as primatology (Haraway 1978/1989) or biology (Rose 1983), constituted their hypotheses and methods to meet the sexist and androcentric (and often racist and Eurocentric) needs of dominant social groups, thereby providing distorted and partial accounts of nature's regularities and underlying causal tendencies and revealing otherwise hidden features of dominant ways of thinking. These and others also directly analyzed the inadequacy of sciences' standards for achieving objectivity or good method, and how the plausibility of these standards has been maintained (see, for example, Harding 1992b and Keller 1984). (26)

An ecofeminist standpoint theory also provides ecocritics and ecocomposition theorists with a space in which to advance growth of knowledge from a situated perspective. Harding explains situatedness from a social science perspective:

standpoint theory claims that some kinds of social locations and political struggles advance the growth of knowledge, contrary to the dominant view that politics and local situatedness can only block scientific inquiry. Given such projects, perhaps one should expect the combination of either disattention or hysterical attack with the absence of serious engagement that, with important exceptions, has characterized even the responses of self-proclaimed postpositivist philosophers of science and science studies scholars to this theory. (26)

These same assertions about local situatedness advancing knowledge can apply in an ecocomposition classroom. When Hekman redefines the feminist standpoint after critiquing some of the theory's weaknesses, she focuses on two questions: "First, if, as we must, we acknowledge that there are many realities that women inhabit, how does this affect the status of the truth claims that feminists advance? Second, if we abandon a single axis of analysis, the standpoint of women, and instead try to accommodate the multiple, potentially infinite standpoints of diverse women, do we not also lose the analytic force of our argument?" ("Truth and Method" 349). According to Hekman,

Feminist standpoint theory is part of an emerging paradigm of knowledge and knowledge production that constitutes an epistemological break with modernism. Feminist standpoint theory defines knowledge as particular rather than universal; it jettisons the neutral observer of modernist epistemology; it defines subjects as constructed by relational forces rather than as transcendent. As feminist standpoint theory has developed, the original tension between social construction and universal truth has dissolved. But it is significant that this has been accomplished, not by privileging one side of the dichotomy, but by deconstructing the dichotomy itself. The new paradigm of knowledge of which feminist standpoint theory is a part involves rejecting the definition of knowledge and truth as either universal or relative in favor of a conception of all knowledge as situated and discursive. ("Truth and Method" 356-7).

Hekman recasts feminist standpoint theory in relation to Max Weber's "ideal type" as a counterpoint to relativism, arguing that knowledge is situated and discursive, so discourse communities may share values and ideals. From such a perspective, Hekman concludes that even though "women speak from multiple standpoints, producing multiple knowledges. . . . This does not prevent women from coming together to work for specific political goals" ("Truth and Method" 363). In an ecocomposition class, then, where standpoint theory joins ecocriticism, an ecofeminist standpoint approach to composition, students can share similar

values regarding ecology and maintain an activist stance, but they can also maintain their own voices, not from a relativist perspective, but from a perspective that, according to Hekman “makes it clear that social analysis is a necessarily political activity, undertaken by agents who live in a world constituted by language and, hence, values. We engage in specific analyses because we are committed to certain values. . . . It is our values, then, that save us from the ‘absolute relativism’ that defenders of modernism so feared” (“Truth and Method” 362).

Ecocomposition and Feminist Standpoint Theory in the Writing Intensive Classroom

To clarify its difference from many other ecofeminist approaches, I call this combining of ecocriticism and ecocomposition with feminist standpoint theory, ecofeminist criticism and ecofeminist composition studies. Such juxtaposition has helped me and other instructors integrate a situated activist-driven approach to writing in 1) classes that take an ecological literary approach but maintain emphasis on critical thinking, reading, and writing that open up a variety of interdisciplinary approaches in the classroom; and 2) classes that take a postmodern discursive ecology approach.

Writing-centered and writing-intensive courses that take a postmodern ecological literary approach highlight the power of viewing knowledge as situated and discursive. For example, a sophomore-level writing course I taught to open-admissions students at Southeastern focused explicitly on nature writing in a variety of genres and drew on this alliance of ecocriticism and postmodernism and the interdisciplinarity it encourages. The course, like the theories, stemmed from the view that representations of nature and the natural are relative rather than universal. Viewing these representations of nature as relative made sense to me, since ecology, which is at the root of ecocriticism, looks at the way species interact with their physical environment and with other species around them as a study of homes, a concept my mostly first-generation college students could embrace.

Weisser and Dobrin focus on the idea of place in their explanation of approaches to postmodern ecocomposition in their introduction to *Ecocomposition: Theoretical and Pedagogical Approaches*. According to Dobrin’s “Writing Takes Place,” an essay in the anthology, ecocomposition is the place where “ecology and rhetoric and composition can converge to better explore the relationships between language, writing, and discourse; and between nature, place, environment, and locations” (12). Dobrin asserts that ecocomposition draws attention to the ideas of context and social construction of identity to include physical realities of place, and of natural and constructed space, both ideological constructs that often seem ignored in favor of more conceptual ideological structures such as gender or race” (12). Studying eco-

gy from the perspective of both shared and individual standpoints—situatedness—may deepen readings of both self and of literary texts.

When designing the course, I found it necessary to provide my Southeastern Oklahoma State University students with diverse views of nature and the natural through a variety of genres, emphasizing the need for immersion in pieces from a variety of disciplines and foregrounding views of knowledge as situated and discursive. I included Marilyn Robinson's *Housekeeping*, Simon Ortiz's *After and Before Lightning*, Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*, Sheri S. Tepper's *Shadow's End*, and an anthology of essays entitled Deborah Clow and Donald Snow's *Northern Lights: A Selection of New Writing from the American West* to which students responded in short response papers and longer more formal essays.

I also provided students with readings from the sciences, from anthropology, and from history to ground the literary works, including excerpts from Stephen Jay Gould's *Dinosaur in a Haystack*. Readings from genres like fiction, essay, poetry, fantasy, postmodern fiction interacted with documentary and narrative films, including *After the Warming* and *Leaving Normal*, again highlighting the need for an interdisciplinary approach with a postmodern feminist view of ecocriticism, but clarified that we were not taking a relativist approach to our reading but one based in values shared by our multiple discourse communities. Our readings highlighted the diversity of perspectives regarding ecology—the study of homes. But they also highlighted common goals to sustain our ecology. Solutions differed but

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goals intersected. Students’ standpoints on the issues explored in the texts also differed but provided an inroad to action as well as critical reading and writing.

One nontraditional female student responded to dominant female characters in *Shadow's End*, for example, arguing that Saluez and Lutha were greatly “affected by internal conflict. Doubts about their lives and futures dominate their thinking. Their journey to the Omphalos only served to increase these doubts and make them more agonizing to Saluez and Lutha.” The student also connected these dominant characters’

experiences with her own, finding ways she might negotiate resolution to such dilemmas, just as one of these characters negotiates a resolution of her own, choosing to “know [. . .] better” rather than hanging on, as the other character does to “wanting to believe.”

Students' written responses to their readings were also grounded in postmodern feminist ecocriticism, since they were meant to highlight how each student's cultural and literary repertoire and ideology—their standpoints and values—impacted on their reading of each text, especially in conjunction with the repertoire and ideology reflected by the texts they read. Intertwined with these somewhat literary goals, however, were goals meant to stimulate self-awareness (if not actual ideological change) in my students. One of the goals of the class was for students to not only interrogate the repertoires and ideologies represented by the texts they read, but also to examine the assumptions and beliefs they believe they themselves brought to their readings and how they impacted on their reaction to the texts. By making their own values transparent, students recognized their place in the ecocritical conversation and gained the agency necessary to write toward a sustainable future.

One Native American student, for example, explored her reaction to Housekeeping through a comparison of the novel with the film *Leaving Normal*. In spite of the radical ecology emphasized in the novel, this student recognized and responded to the freedom found in nature illustrated by both novel and film. She also connected that freedom with travel, leaving, and wandering, but asserted that “all of the wandering and traveling did not take away the problems they had and the trappings of culture that tried to follow them.” She then noted how her sympathetic views toward nonhuman nature and her cynical perspective on dominant culture affected her response, noting that she too sought freedom in nature but, since she could not escape the “trappings of culture,” she must learn to both refute and accommodate them when necessary.

Students followed one of two formats for these responses. The first was more informal and asked students to answer specific questions about how the text's repertoire (literary and general knowledge base) and ideology (literary and general worldview) either conflicted or confirmed their own, especially in relation to environmental issues reflected by the texts. Simon Ortiz's Native American poetry, for example, responds to a non-Western worldview that perceives space and the natural environment as sacred and interconnected with cyclical time. It also defines elements of non-human nature and even inanimate objects as “persons.” Students' reactions to these non-Western views, once interrogated, helped them not only gain awareness and tolerance for difference but also for nature and the natural world.

With knowledge of different cultures' reactions, both real and imagined, to environmental problems—including the disasters possible after global warming—students started a campus recycling program, fought to change the mascots name from “The Savages” to “The Savage Storm,” and formed a feminist book club where they could discuss feminist readings in a safe environment. They also attended and participated in a Native American Symposium, talked freely about their own heritage and its impact on their identity, and gained con-

fidence to complete their work in this class and others, demonstrating the power of place in writing. Their successful entrance into academic, civic, and professional discourse communities (once they moved on to the workplace) demonstrated their literal coming to voice.

A second approach directed students to write one-page, single-spaced (with MLA-style parenthetical citations) reading responses to help them think through the readings and form the basis for their contributions to discussions. I asked that students include the following in each response: A title—this will signal to your readers that you have a clear focus; A clear reference to the title and author of the piece you are referring to; An epigraph, or a brief block quotation from the assigned reading or observation—to demonstrate close reading or observation and to bring readers into your response; A question, or a series of questions raised in the course of the reading; A response to the quotation and the questions it raises.

To connect with their own ideology and repertoire and move beyond this more modernist patriarchal and structured approach, I asked students to think through questions like the following before they responded: How do your beliefs and assumptions coincide with or differ from those of the text on central issues? What does the text fail to say about the assumptions it raises? This may point to elements a writer takes for granted and does not make explicit, the place the text's relation to its underlying belief system may be found. What is the context to which the reading responds? What kinds of ideological conflicts underlie the assumptions of the text? What conflicts is it not dealing with or might it be trying to suppress? How does your own belief system line up with that of the reading? Do myths touched on in the reading line up with reality? What myths of our own culture can be compared or contrasted with those of the reading?

These responses prompted stimulating discussions and written short and long responses as well as voluntary calls to action. One student, for example, found *Housekeeping's* ideology particularly offensive because it seemed to promote anti-social behavior and negligent parenting. When this student—a nontraditional Baptist minister—explored the reasons for his discomfort in writing, however, he realized he had neglected his own “family” by neglecting environmental and social justice issues in his ministry. He discovered that even though *Housekeeping* seemed to promote neglect, it also validated localized nurturing of both nature and the women connected to it—Sylvie and Ruth. He found that he had, like Darlene, embraced broad cultural values without considering the local and the individual. He and his congregation had promoted overseas causes, especially those in African missions, but had neglected local issues that affected mothers and children in the region. In his final paper, he proposed a solution to local land use policies that benefited human and nonhuman nature, educating women and girls, so they could develop more sustainable farming, gathering, and ranching techniques.

Feminist Standpoint Theory and Ecomposition-Driven First-Year Composition Courses

Writing-Centered ecomposition courses may also highlight either or both postmodern and essentialist views, drawing on critical theory, especially ecofeminist standpoint theory, a particular kind of critical theory. By particularizing critical theory instructors can maintain agency for students in relation to both their writing and their representation and response to the natural world. According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Epistemology*,

feminist standpoint theory is a type of critical theory, as this term was understood by the Frankfurt school of critical social theorists, from Adorno to Habermas. Critical theories aim to empower the oppressed to improve their situation. They therefore incorporate pragmatic constraints on theories of the social world. To serve their critical aim, social theories must (a) represent the social world in relation to the interests of the oppressed—i.e., those who are the subjects of study; (b) supply an account of that world which is accessible to the subjects of study, which enables them to understand their problems; and (c) supply an account of the world which is usable by the subjects to study to improve their condition. Critical theory is theory of, by, and for the subjects of study. These pragmatic features of critical theory raise the possibility that claims of superiority for particular theories might be based more on pragmatic than epistemological virtues (Harding 1991, Hartsock 1996). Even if a particular feminist theory cannot make good on the claim that it has *privileged* access to reality, it may offer true representations that are more *useful* to women than other truthful representations.

These representations may be more useful to students in an ecomposition, as well as to the environment.

One way I infused this ecofeminist standpoint theory into a first-year ecomposition course was to localize both the writing and the readings. Another course taught to open-admissions students at Southeastern focused on opposing viewpoints on the American frontier and highlighted differing perspectives on issues relevant to those living in Oklahoma, like representations of Native Americans, diverse reactions to oil production, and causes and repercussions of the dust bowl. Students summarized and critiqued particular writings to gain skills in close reading, applied those skills to evaluations of film for a public audience, synthesized their own readings in relation to a local issue significant to them, and then pursued a research topic for a pre-professional audience, members of their prospective discipline, and presented it in some form (Power Point presentation, poster session, etc.) for a wider community.

Here emphasis was on both environmental issues and writing and attempted to provide students with agency as writers and activists examining local environmental issues for a community audience. The emphasis, then, was on the idea that discourse and values are localized but still powerful. This course, like the others I have taught, showed students that postmodern theory need not silence nature and the students and faculty who study it; it may even lend them a more powerful voice. Students who see theory—even composition and ecofeminist theory—as all talk and no action can benefit from applying ecofeminist standpoint theory in academic, civic, and professional spheres, since examining their own perspectives and those of a variety of texts makes the ideology behind discourse transparent and, consequently, more easily confronted. Kathi Weeks provides a renewed definition of feminist standpoint theory in her *Constituting Feminist Subjects* and asserts that a standpoint is not essential but situated. According to Weeks, “A standpoint is derived from political practice, from a collective effort to revalue and reconstitute specific practices. Thus, a standpoint constitutes a subject, but one which does not rely on a transcendental or natural essence. A standpoint is a project, not an inheritance; it is achieved, not given” (136).

As Hekman argues, feminists, ecocritics, and ecomposition students and theorists “cannot prove their values to be objectively correct ones. On this point the postmoderns are correct: we live in a world devoid of a normative metanarrative. But we can offer persuasive arguments in defense of our values and the politics they entail” (“Truth and Method” 362). If, according to Hekman, we are all “situated, engaged agents who live in a discursively constituted world” (“Truth and Method” 359), combining a postmodern feminist standpoint theory with ecocriticism in the classroom will break down binaries leftover from the Enlightenment and give students and nature a more powerful voice.

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