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Eco-justice poetry: An emotive transgression

Nicola Follis, Western Washington University

Abstract

Dualistic value-hierarchies that are deeply embedded within Western culture assign certain identities, traits and ways of knowing as superior to others. According to eco-justice frameworks, these hierarchies allow some humans to be valued over others and all humans to be valued over the Earth. I specifically talk about the mind/body and human/nature split as two dualities present in Western discourse. Emotions are deemed inferior to the mind's rational and objective ways of knowing while humans are considered separate and superior to nature. I argue that eco-justice poetry acts as a small transgression against a value-hierarchized culture that devalues emotional connection to more-than-human nature. Eco-justice poetry works to elevate emotional voice while providing a critical framework that recognizes the intersections between human identity, culture, and the world. Providing space for emotional reflection and connection, especially within educational programming, is increasingly important as ecological crises continue to unfold. The world requires pain, love, and gratitude to serve as an emotive reminder that humans are part of the ecology of the world.

Keyword: Eco-justice, poetry, education, emotion, objectivism, anthropocentrism

Introduction

I start with a poem. A poem written about relationship and transgression. Throughout this capstone, I reflect on the ways that culture has influenced my own relationship with the Earth. In order to do this, I first uncover my ancestral lineage and their perceived connection to land. In a voyage toward the world that I am hoping for, I also need to include the world from which I came. As I proceed, I realize that each of my ancestors rebelled in small ways against the culture in which they were socialized. I am no different. The lessons I have learned through my work over the last eighteen months in graduate school and my reflections on eco-justice poetry is part of my own transgression.

Land Rebellion

*The tilt of boulders from their sturdy perches
As brush suffocates in untamed inferno
Molten change speaks as ash cascades
And willow growth sprouts from blackened soil*



*The echo shouting from peaking crests
Like jagged gendarmes with stone swords
Empowering below me fields of granitic talus
I am not this kind of rebellion*

*The caress of wind that wearily whispers
Coaxing a single yellowed leaf from the canopies,
Obstructing mirrored surfaces with my ripples
With the slightest of autumnal pressure*

*Emerald jewels that open in winter darkness
Baring veined appendages and capturing light
In otherwise bare and twiggy forests.
This is the rebellion that I am*

*Decorated structures of towering stone
My hands encased in sodden soil
Eyes raised above the heaven-bound spires
In conflicted faith I remain unstirred*

*Those same eyes remain latched to clouds
As damp dirt was brushed carelessly from my knees
And place was discarded for deathly destiny
This is where the rebellion started*

*Across the sea, no stolen home was sacred
For when trees blackened with earthly anger
Burned my precious coins in the decomposing branches
The shallow footprints began to fade*

*My eyes flutter open, soaked in tannin
I slip place into my pocket as gold stalks dance in salty air
And the craggy white mountain warily watches.
I was seen as no rebel*

*My footsteps sink deeper, my eyes in earthly focus
Cross-like blessings beaten and broken
Resentful of "gods" message of delivered hate
A loving, heated embrace in winter's bite*

*And this love is superior to ones I have known
Like the value of land that is right to be owned
Or a people who claim because that's what they're told
This is the rebellion that I know*

*And I still do what they have told me I should
Folding cloth napkins next to jam in crystal glasses
Constructing wreaths of spray-painted hydrangea
Toes encased, sheltered from never-fading forest*

*My voice expressed simply in dashes of color
And pebbles turned over in the nest of my hand
With elaborate beds of sprouting life, place is the last that I remember.
This is the rebellion that I know*

*I feel a land more complex than capital gains
Or a passion grown in potting soil
And know that they told me there would be enough
As I feel the earth shatter inside my soul*

*My drifting line dangles free of steelhead bite
And storied trees rest stoic in their graveyards
Inside me, the destiny that manifested begins to crack
This is the rebellion that I know*

*My reflection distorted in windy waters
I adhere the pieces of what makes me human
And recognize that I belong to those that came before
Through conscious story and memory*

*The value of land is more than the right to be owned
And love of place is one that I've known
For land belongs to our collective identity
This is the rebellion that I am*

*No longer claim because that's what I'm told
Becoming whole when I am most apart
Belonging to place adhering like lichen on stone
Crumbling basaltic towered hierarchy*

*Truly believing with mind, body, and soul
In the tangled tapestry of which I'm entwined
Where each thread creates a more vivid picture
This is the rebellion I will know*

I guess graduate school has turned me into a rebel. Who would have thought? Also, just so you know, I always wanted to be a rebel and was never quite good at it...and here we are. Look at me now. In all seriousness, my education has changed how I form relationships with the world. I transgress against a culture that separates humans from the ecology of place. I remain defiant in my refusal to conform to the belief that I need to

hold the world at arm's reach in order to truly know it. I fight for justice by striving to heal the broken web of life that was shattered when culture decided to sever our minds from our hearts and our bodies from nature (Martusewicz et al., 2015).

I turn to eco-justice poetry for assistance in assigning words to my feelings. Eco-justice poetry strives to rekindle emotional connection while critically examining why the emotional connection was severed in the first place. In awakening toward this realization, a rebellion toward social justice *and* ecological sustainability is born. I urge you to join me in this transgression by being brave in vulnerability, by daring to take this moment to love, fear and hope, and by examining the ways culture shapes perceived understanding of the world.

I have worn my emotions on my sleeve since I was little. There is part of me that has always seen this as a weakness. Proof of my "feminine hysteria". I have worked hard to find strength in my emotions and to reach a frame of mind where I can elevate my emotions in hopes that others can feel empowered to do so as well. I believe that giving voice to what gives me pain, fear, and hope is what intimately tethers me to the world.

Fearful Tears

*If my tears cascade
From eyelashes that glisten
Diminishing strength
In my swollen, reddened eyes.*

*If I show my fear
My poise succumbs to power
Like rips of currents
Forced lips apart as I tread*

*In tears and those fears
My body does not crumble
I don't weep weakness
Nor do I drown in darkness*

*I show you my soul
Soaring deep, raw and uncaged
As an act of strength
Coaxing you to do the same*

Poetry: Giving voice to the heart

Feelings are revealed when expressed in poetry. This is in sharp contrast to other aspects of life where story plots, objectiveness, and logic can offer a place to hide (Palmer, 1998). Many people hide because they have been taught that feelings are inferior to

rational thought (Palmer, 1998). Poems have survived as an outlet for feelings to flourish—a mechanism where the deepest, most vulnerable aspects of oneself are brought forth into the world (Lorde, 1985). As educator and socio-cultural critic bell hooks (1994) expresses, poems are particularly important in “a society that has us believe that there is no dignity in the experience of passion, that to feel deeply is to be inferior” (pp. 174-175). I feel that without passion, humanity withers. Without our feelings we sever the relationships we have with ourselves, our communities, and the world around us. As ethnobotanist Gary Nabhan (1997) articulates:

[The] inner and outer is not a duality but a dynamic—like every breath we take. We are inspired by what surrounds us; we take it into our bodies, and we respond with expression. What we have inside us is, ultimately, always of the larger, wilder world (p. 11).

Poetic thought is one way to express the dynamic emotional connection between ourselves and the world in which we belong. Western culture rejects this inner world of passion, spirit and emotion and subscribes to the myth that logical thought is the only way of knowing (Palmer, 1998). In the process, our relationships are severed and discarded (Palmer, 1998).

Poetry is a language of the heart. A scrawled transcript where the deepest reaches of our inner spirit joins hands with our experiences in a true meeting of mind, body and soul. Feminist writer Audre Lorde (1985) claims in her essay *Poetry is Not a Luxury*, that “poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest external horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives” (p. 37). Written in our poems is the euphoria of living fully, of hope chiseled into our chests, and the heartache of loving hard. Recorded in our stanzas are the languages of fear crawling over our skin, the planted seeds of grief in our guts, and the yearning for purpose and belonging. For these reasons, I see poetic thought as an act of strength and vulnerability.

Reading and writing poetry dissects my internal core and lays each piece delicately out for the world to see. Through my writing, my outer veneer of what I pretend to be is stripped apart and I unequivocally reveal myself. By sharing my untrained writing of poetry, I am telling you *who* I truly am.

I have no formal experience in writing poetry. In my poems the meter is discarded, rhyming is somewhat haphazard, and I often flounder in self-doubt. However, I continue to share my writing as an act of protest against the fear that binds me in my naivety and lack of sophistication. I express the pain that I have for the world, I dare to hope, and I yearn for wholeness. Poetry is an act of strength because this revelation is terrifying. I am wary of rejection and fearful of judgement. At the same time, I acknowledge that my wariness is not unique in a dominant culture that separates mind, body, and soul. A culture that devalues feelings as inferior to the thoughts that our feelings can produce (Lorde, 1995; Palmer, 1998). The collective fear of being vulnerable is precisely the reason why I decide to write poetry. Through my writing, I am encouraged to remember that in paying attention to feelings I form deep emotional connections.

In the following poem, I write about the pain that I feel when I experience the world as a passive observer. In these moments, life flutters by as if on a television screen and the minutes whirl without meaning like when I scroll robotically on my phone. Life feels distant, fast moving, and cold. These are also the moments when I feel broken and lost. When my mind remembers to pay attention to the emotions rushing through my body the world becomes more vibrant and beautiful. I feel most alive when my outward experiences stir inside of me. I feel grounded in wholeness and my life is given purpose.

Button-like Pupils

*Our bodies drift by in cloudy-eyed dreams
While button-like pupils fasten on screens
Tetrised pieces spin and settle in place
Jig sawed together in fateful mistake*

*Downcast lids remain unaware in sorrow
Of painted leaves in tango with sparrows
Sun dancing like lights on awakened leaves
While gold spears thread a mosaic motif*

*Grasping for warmth in veins that don't speak
And scrolling away leaves falling to break
Clicking news that swamps flimsy nerves with hate
And muscles spasm in fingers that ache*

*The vibrant splatter traps eyes in cord chains
With pleasure drifting in ephemeral streams
And silt exposed in these watery graves
Shouting dust that splutters amidst displays*

*Specks suspend in columns of baking Earth
Salty sage sprouting through cracks in caked dirt
And quartz pieces with angles degraded
By soft kisses of diatom decay*

*Song succumbs, mired in muddled riddles
Intricate synapses fizzle and fade
Typewritten phrases leak through chalice hands
Engraving shallow divots in ecru sand*

*Puzzled pebbles spin and settle in place
Moving together in loving embrace
Muscles relax in fingers submerging
in elated gasps of electric surge*

*Unravel hitches that weakly tether
Bound to notions sketched in compact gesture
Attune to whispers soulfully blending
Vibrant pigments in subtle vein-like threads*

When I reflect on my teaching, I see many parallels to eco-poetry. Eco-poetry is a genre of nature poetry that speaks about the more-than-human world and the impacts that humans have on their environment (Shoptaw, 2016). The genre has “designs on us, that imagine changing the ways we think, feel about, and live and act in the world” (Shoptaw, 2016, p. 408). Wendell Berry, Gary Snyder and Mary Oliver are some examples of eco-poets (Bryson, 2005). Much like eco-poetry, my teaching tends to recognize the interconnectedness of the world, emphasizes relationships between human and more-than-human nature, and expresses wariness about the lack of emotional attachment that teachers and learners have with their environments (Bryson, 2005). As an educator, I often balance a similar paradox that occurs within eco-poetic thought. The paradox is that I value knowing information about the world and I recognize that this same wonder-filled world is unknowable (Bryson, 2005). I have come to realize that I am moving beyond eco-poetic thought in my teaching. Eco-poetry has provided a foundation for me as I strive to incorporate a more eco-justice poetic approach to education.

The distinction between the genres of eco-poetry and eco-justice poetry is slight. However, the small differences have large impacts in how they show up in my teaching. Eco-poetry works to build emotional connection through appreciation of nature. Eco-justice expands on the ideas of eco-poetry to question *why* emotional connection was severed in the first place. Likewise, eco-poetry speaks toward human impacts on the environment while eco-justice interrogates *how* culture influences ecological relationships. To do this, Poet Camille Dungy (2016) states that, “it is the task...of eco-poetics and eco-justice poetry to write about history, economics, politics, social justice, and the environment all at once” (p. xvii). Instead of viewing the environment as something that should be pristine and untouched by humans, the environment can be defined as “the place in which we work, live, play, and worship” (Tuckey, 2018). These same places include complicated histories, socio-political contexts, and cultural worldviews that influence human connection with the Earth (Martusewicz et al., 2015).

Eco-justice weaves together humans and more-than-human nature into an ornate tapestry of interconnectedness. My life is given more purpose when I feel like my body is part of a greater system. In contrast, I feel lost when I view myself as an individual mind floating independently and aimlessly. I work hard to remember the tapestry so that I have guidance in who I am and the work I do.

Tapestry

*Blue-green strands threaded through eyes
Cross-stitched tapestry of life*

*Loops in shape of alpine lakes
Topography wrapped in knots*

*Needle-pricked fingers, blood spills
Smearing across the fabric
Rusty backdrop among green-blues
Image stunning and complete*

Eco-justice

The field of eco-justice is complex because many of the foundational ideas are formed through academic language and thought. I want my ideas to be accessible. I will do my best to provide a simple explanation of how I see eco-justice, with the warning that I risk oversimplifying the many nuances. Eco-justice is structured around the fundamental idea that the ecological crisis is rooted in cultural worldview (Martusewicz et al., 2015). My main focus is that the over-emphasis of rational scientific thought within Western culture has led to an exploitative worldview that sees humans as separate and superior to the rest of the world. In this way, eco-justice works for justice and sustainability in a different way than social justice or environmental justice.

Social justice advocates recognize hierarchies and inequities within human beings based on identities such as race, gender, class, age, and ability. Similarly, the field of environmental justice argues that these same identities experience inequitable protection from environmental health hazards and inequitable consequences from environmental decision making (EPA. n.d). Social justice and environmental justice are different from eco-justice because both center human beings (Washington et al., 2018). Human concerns are prioritized over the rest of the ecological world. As a result, many social justice advocates enforce the same logic of domination that leads to social inequities in the first place by sorting parts of Earth into layers of importance (Martusewicz, 2015). The inequities found within human spheres are necessary to address. However, by assigning human-centered systems as most important, the cultural roots of these inequities are not being dismantled because a human-centered worldview is still being acknowledged (Washington et al., 2018).

Eco-justice works at the confluence of social justice, environmental justice, and environmentalism. The field works to explore culture as a root cause in sorting certain identities, traits, and ways of knowing into hierarchical categories where some identities, traits, and ways of knowing are inherently valued as superior to others (Martusewicz et al., 2015; Washington et al., 2018). Specifically, eco-justice critically evaluates the way that these hierarchies are sorted in duality where one identity, trait, or worldview is seen as opposite and more valued than the other. The relevant dualistic pairs present within Western culture *and* emphasized in this capstone include: reason over emotion, mind over body, and culture over nature (Martusewicz et al., 2015).

First Lament

*Nerves entwine within dendritic machines
Chugging bland outputs from emerald rainbows
Numbers sketched on the flesh of torn trees
While tenderness lays in neglected stumps*

This hierarchical sorting creates a logic of domination that is deeply embedded within Western culture (Warren, 2000). The logic of domination has created the construction of a worldview where some humans are valued over others and all humans are valued over the natural world. One way to disrupt the logic of domination is to rearrange thinking to become more ecological (Martusewicz et al., 2015). An ecological worldview recognizes differences without assigning hierarchical value (Washington, 2018). Instead, each identity, trait, and way of knowing is valued as a dependent part of a system that interacts with everything else (Martusewicz et al., 2015).

Historical thought has led to the modern discourse that objective science is the superior way of knowing the world. These are ideas with roots in the Enlightenment Era. Enlightenment thinkers wanted to “know” inherently unknowable living systems of the world by simplifying living things into predictable, spiritless, and isolated objects (Martusewicz et al., 2015).

Second Lament

*Recorded in the scrolls of an era
Where control gave birth to knowing
Spirit of the mind conquers gleefully*

The nature of our bodies

Scientific practice has historically assumed that, “to know the natural world is to be able to control it by applying rationality and reason. [Science] emphasizes objectivity and purports to be culture-free as well as outside morality” (Martusewicz et al., 2015, p.77). This dualistic thinking has ripple effects where reason, mind, and culture tend to be superior to the perceived subjectivity of emotion, body, and nature. (Martusewicz et al., 2015).

Our institutions have worked hard to remove biases and whims from scientific thought. In the process, we have begun to hold the world at arm’s reach out of fear that if we let ourselves become too emotionally invested, objectivity and control, will be contaminated (Palmer, 1998). The irony is that reaching true objectivity is made impossible by inherent human biases. Nevertheless, science desires to be objective as possible and one threat to rationality is the subjectivity of emotion. Parker Palmer (1998) claims:

For objectivism, any way of knowing that requires subjective involvement between the knower and the known is regarded as primitive, unreliable, and even dangerous. The intuitive is derided as irrational, true feeling is dismissed as sentimental, the imagination is seen as chaotic and unruly, and storytelling is labeled as personal and pointless (p. 53).

As an educator with a background in scientific research, I have spent a large portion of my school life trying to navigate between my rational and emotional ways of knowing. I searched for emotional spaces in the scientific research that I was conducting and felt that I was reaching for a cookie jar on the top shelf (*and I love cookies*). There was little room for emotional reflection. Instead, my science education deposited scientific fact into my brain as objective truth.

Reflecting back, I feel a lot of anger at a culture that told me that my feelings were not valid. I was told that I was too sensitive or too kind. Caring too much was wielded as an insult. One time, I overheard educators during an astronomy lesson tell their curious students to lead more with their mind and less with their heart. Likewise, several of my past students were educated to believe that feelings had no place in science.

A hyper-rational way of knowing isolates me from the connection that I crave. I need love to feel like I belong to the world. I need hope to encourage me to act. With the help of mentors, I have realized that the mind and heart are both important.

Toward Objectivity

*In a school of objectivity
I wasn't taught how to love
Or what it feels like to belong
I wasn't taught to be whole
Or what it feels like to hope
and...
We must have hope
Hope for love
Hope for belonging
Hope for wholeness
For in this hope is our liberation
and...
We wonder at the hate
The lying and despair
When we were not taught
How to become anything more
Than objective subjects in society's machine*

I am going to take us on a little journey. The story starts with me walking down a hill in the pouring rain, slipping on steep steps, and creaking open a heavy metal door. The door opens to the cold, dark, and damp building at the edge of campus where I am spending hours conducting fisheries research during my undergraduate degree.

I was testing the hypothesis that Coho salmon parr locate food through their sense of smell. I was given 150 Coho salmon and was mandated by animal care guidelines to feed and clean their tank every day for the six months that I was doing research. I spent hours constructing elaborate tubing networks that provided assembled acrylic tanks with water saturated in salmon egg odor. When this method inevitably did not work, I tried the simpler version of placing eggs within plastic bags inside little traps. Through my data collection, three things became very apparent that had little to do with the numbers being recorded. First, I began to love these Coho babies that I visited and cared for every single day. Second, I felt personal guilt whenever one died from harsh transfer between holding tank and testing location. Third, it became increasingly apparent that my carefully recorded numbers could not reflect my emphatic feeling that the fish were succumbing to fear.

Near the end of my research, I was told that the surviving Coho were to be killed because they could not be introduced back into the ecosystem after being kept in a tank. This made sense. After all, it certainly wouldn't have been logical to free these disease and parasite infested fish to contaminate our "resources". Despite this logic, I was emotionally devastated. I began to question why my quest for knowledge justified the elimination of life. Why was knowing objective fact about something seen as more important than the lives of the Coho?

In my final presentation I showed my methods, figures and statistical analysis. I was so proud of my results which showed that Coho parr located food by their sense of smell. Reflecting back, I was so focused on delivering my box and whisker plots that I failed to notice the subjective lessons that I had learned that were arguably more valuable. For instance, my commitment to care, my empathetic connection, and the power of a shared experience with my Coho parr, were never mentioned. The value that I felt for a life other than my own was discarded at the door when I entered this scientific forum. There was no report on the relationships that I had developed with the fish swirling away in an isolated tank.

Let Us Remember

*It is so simple
to leave on the tap
If water, not blood
drips from the faucet*

*It is so easy
to leave electronics whirling away
when carcasses of fish cut by turbines
hide in murky pools*

*We are able to forget
as scallops, shrimp and salmon
appear on plates
served by someone else*

*That shells dissolve,
Rivers disappear
bottoms are dredged
and fish are farmed for food*

*And we need water, food
electricity is convenient
and let us remember the Earth as we consume,
Where we and all are harnessed.*

It is evident to me now that I was taught how to think but was hardly ever questioned about how learning about the world made me feel. I received good grades and succeeded in this field of logic and rationality. Despite my ability to conform to teacher expectations, as someone who wears their emotions on their sleeve, I reflected on how truth was always more complex than facts written in a textbook, accessed through lecture, or precisely measured. A more complete truth includes acknowledging the culture, values, biases, and emotion that complicate scientific results. Science stems from a curiosity in learning more about the world and a desire to attach meaning to our short and precious lives. The act of “doing” science is a metaphor for wonder and a conduit for relationship. As the following poem emotes, I think that science has the capacity to heal the practitioner through conscious admission that each individual belongs to something larger than our mortal bodies. When science allows for emotions and speaks toward the interaction between humans and the world, a more complete picture is created about what it means to be alive.

Toward Objectivity

They told me...

*of mountain crests long since eroded
and uncharted valleys devoid of light
of growing leaves in late winter shroud
and carotenoid colors taking flight*

They told me...

*of stars rambling on watery legs
and atoms created in unheard bursts
of those that are faithful in their consumption
and frozen seeds that must be eaten first.*

*they told me how to think
often omitting how to feel
logically lined thoughts*

without focus on how to heal

And what if...

*Looking at icy carved stone taught the persistence of life
and our past was reflected in present
budding leaves singing of hope in spring
and their senescence of fear and pain.*

And what if...

*tiny steps are seen in our own footprints
and my heart beats from old soil...from gnarled branches...from turbulent seas
entwined in the reciprocity of the living.*

Why is this not what they told me?

The word ecology is a good example where reason and emotion are held in relationship instead of in duality. The Greek root of ecology is oikos. The English translation of oikos is both the noun “house” and the verb “to dwell” (Howard, 2010). The objectivity in science, technology, engineering, and math teaches how to manufacture houses. Subjectivity can teach how to dwell in the places that are called home. The dominant narrative in our institutions is that western culture, “privileges the knowledge of building at the expense of the knowledge of dwelling. We must reclaim the word ecology for education to understand that as we build, we must dwell, and the two cohere” (Howard, 2010). Objectivity grounds individuals in what is testable and shared while subjectivity joins the human heart to the ecology of the world. Instead of attempting to remove subjectivity completely, I believe that rational and emotional ways of knowing are both necessary for an ecological approach to living.

So, how does this relate to poetry? The field of eco-justice recognizes the imaginative way of knowing that is expressed in poetry and works to elevate these feelings through critical thought on culture and relationship. Eco-justice provides a framework to poetic thought by critically evaluating the cultural reasons for social inequities and environmental degradation. As eco-justice educator Rebecca Martusewicz (2013) points out, injustice occurs “[when] rational humans are defined as fundamentally superior to and disconnected from the natural world... [and the natural world is] defined by the philosophes of the Scientific Revolution as dead, objectified, and mechanized” (p. 265). Through the artistic expression that poetry provides, emotional connection to the world is expressed. This expression moves beyond simply valuing the Earth as a resource for exploitation or a machine to know about. Instead, I feel that poetry vocalizes and celebrates feelings of belonging to something larger than oneself. Humans are not separate from nature. Instead, the human world, including history and culture, is wrapped up in a vast web of life (Martusewicz et al., 2015). Belonging to this complex web grounds me in reciprocity, gratitude and wholeness. Likewise, pain that is felt in

social and ecological crisis is expressed through poetry as well (Tuckey, 2018). As environmental activist and poet Melissa Tuckey (2018) writes in *Ghost Fishing: An eco-justice poetry anthology*:

A feeling of being overwhelmed by crisis sets in for those who are concerned about the fate of our communities, our oceans, our forests, and our planet. Only through imagination can we access the full extent of our grief, empathy, love, anger, and passion. Without it we are paralyzed. Poetry gives us access to difficult emotional landscapes and to the ferocity of hope (p.7).

Poetry is emotional and subjective within a culture that is hyper-rational. Poetry has voiced the attributes that make us human in a society that reduces bodies to machines. Poetry has persisted as a form of justice in an unjust world. Mary Oliver (1998) claims that “no poet ever wrote a poem to dishonor life, to compromise high ideals, to scorn religious views to demean hope or gratitude, to argue against tenderness, to place rancor before love, or to praise littleness of soul” (p. 104). Eco-justice honors life, idealism, hope, gratitude, tenderness, love, and soul while acknowledging diverse emotional and cultural relationships to the greater ecological system. I feel deeper connections when I remember that I am more than a logical machine and the world is more than an object to study.

Wingbeats

*Toward a home that is unknown
My heart beats in pump-like rhythm
To the warning call of birds
Mirrored song in discarded quiver.*

*Scalloped wings of the monarch
Kiss milkweed farewell
To flutter along invisible trails
Toward a home that is unknown*

Poetic pedagogy: An eco-justice approach to education

Environmental education has the capacity to incorporate eco-justice-poetic thought within its framework. Curriculum within the outdoor environmental education field emphasizes building knowledge about ecological systems, inspiring appreciation of nature, and increasing environmental awareness (Martusewicz et al., 2015). Human-centered narratives are often included in environmental education fields as well. Anthropocentric phrasing that I hear involves, “we must manage our resources, so we can continue to have access to them”. These types of narratives are important and hint at the interconnectedness between humans and “nature,” but only go as far as maintaining a powerful metaphor that Earth is meant to be used and financially capitalized on by humans (Martusewicz et al., 2015). Simplifying nature to monetary value assumes that “nature” is inferior to the needs of human beings.

I have experienced environmental education curricula delivered in powerful and impactful ways. However, I argue that it is necessary for students to understand that nested within an ecology of place is historical, cultural, and socio-political contexts. In environmental education, this means moving away from simply spreading awareness about unsustainability toward interrogating the socio-cultural and socio-political reasons why unsustainability has occurred in the first place. In the midst of an ecological crisis, providing space for emotional reflection and connection is increasingly important. The world requires love, gratitude, and pain to serve as a reminder that humans are part of the ecology of the world.

I wrote this next poem to remind myself that I am part of a greater ecological system. Belonging is a comfort. My feelings make me fall in love with life which also gives me so much fear of death. I am hindered by fear and am resentful of being afraid. Feeling part of a greater whole provides some relief from the pain I feel when I think of life ending. Eco-justice teaches me that I am part of something larger than my own mortality. In this way, eco-justice is healing. When I am gone from this world, parts of myself will persist on this planet.

Ancestral Trees

*soft bodies of flesh
lay nestled in soil
among the creatures
that prosper in dark*

*our fading retinas
clouded with soft earth
rest in velvet ground
caressed by fingers*

*tendrils are revealed
yearning for water
outstretched and searching
so life can begin*

*slowing hearts seek warmth
in canopy shade
icy hands entwine
like glacial water*

*hot embers ignite
legs quaking in rage
encaged in culture
that fears the darkness*

*encaged in culture
hearts devoid of warmth
fear of last exhale
and the velvet ground*

*in science pathways
mind tries to believe
soul screeches in earnest
toward ancestral trees.*

The world is in an ecological crisis. It is time for a paradigm shift in environmental education. Educators can no longer teach about nature or sustainability in a way that reinforces a hyper-rational and human-centered worldview. There is also no time for a purely romantic approach of human interconnectedness with nature. I believe that emotive, spiritual, and ecological ways of knowing form deep connections with the world. However, in order to feel a sense of belonging to the greater ecological whole it is necessary to understand how culture influences relationships.

Lessons found in the holistic framework of eco-justice and scrawled in poetic words may provide guidance in this journey. Eco-justice claims that the ecological crisis is influenced by the same dualistic cultural worldviews that emphasize reason over emotion (Martusewicz et al., 2015; Washington, 2018). Poetry provides an example where emotional and subjective ways of knowing have thrived despite this hyperrationality. Together, eco-justice poetic thought celebrates that each person belongs entwined in a system larger than one mortal mind. Teaching through an eco-justice poetic lens means recognizing that love, gratitude, and empathy can bind us to a greater whole in a different way than our hypotheses, precision instruments, and statistics. Eco-justice poetic teaching cultivates belonging to the Earth through emotional relationships *and* interrogates how culture influences these same relationships. Teachers and learners within the field of environmental education can reflect on the logic of domination within themselves while taking poetic license to love, acknowledge pain, and to express gratitude.

The rebellion that drives me as an educator is hope that my students feel deep emotional belonging to the ecology of the world. This is also the hope that I have for the field of environmental education:

*No longer claim because that's what I'm told
Becoming whole when I am most apart
Belonging to place adhering like lichen on stone
Crumbling basaltic towered hierarchy*

*Truly believing with mind, body and soul
In the tangled tapestry of which I'm entwined
Where each thread creates a more vivid picture
This is the rebellion I will know*

I often feel challenged searching for belonging while navigating these tumultuous emotional seas. My internal dialogue struggles between my culture and my nature. My heart understands that healing can occur when humans feel true belonging to the ecology of the world. Despite this understanding, I often succumb to a discourse rooted in the human-centered world in which I have been socialized. This world tells me that I do not belong. It is a lonely place.

This being said, there are many moments when I feel deep connections. These brief lapses in time where I remind myself that I am intimately connected are when I feel most whole. I am both rattled and embraced by the ephemeral awareness of feeling linked to something larger than myself. In these moments, I feel love, gratitude, elation, and fear of loss all at the same time. This emotional relationship is both an ecological worldview and the poetry of the world. When poetry rises within my soul and I am brave in my vulnerability to hope, fear, and love, I am reminded that building relationships with myself, my communities, and my environment is one step closer to giving my heart to the world.

A handwritten signature consisting of the letters 'S2SS' in a cursive, stylized font. The signature is enclosed within a light blue, semi-transparent rectangular box that is tilted slightly to the right.

Author's Note

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