Rewilding the Imagination: Teaching Ecocriticism in the Change Times

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Abstract

Uncertainty about the future is a defining feature of our times due to ongoing and global environmental emergencies. This reality prompts a re-evaluation of the traditional role, purpose, and ethics of post-secondary courses such as English literature. The present moment calls for pedagogical practices that support holistic learning, community building, ecological awareness, and adaptation skills. Ecocritical instruction guided by wild pedagogy concepts supports students' emotional, social, and ecological selves, and moves ecocritical curriculum beyond unperceived anthropocentric values. The unique neurobiological impacts of reading fiction make ecofiction a valuable resource for fostering social imagining and community building. Wild pedagogy principles are evident in Delia Owen's 2018 ecofiction novel, Where the Crawdads Sing*, and can be explored through three suggested activities.*

Résumé

Les urgences environnementales mondiales actuelles font de l'incertitude face à l'avenir l'une des caractéristiques dominantes de notre époque. Cette réalité appelle la réévaluation du rôle, de l'objectif et de l'éthique traditionnels des cours postsecondaires (ex. la littérature anglaise). L'heure est venue d'adopter des pratiques pédagogiques qui favorisent l'apprentissage holistique, le développement du sentiment d'appartenance, la conscience écologique et la capacité d'adaptation. L'instruction écocritique guidée par les concepts des pédagogies de la nature soutient le soi affectif, social et écologique des apprenants et permet au programme d'enseignement écocritique d'aller au-delà des valeurs anthropocentriques inconscientes. La lecture d'œuvres de fiction entraîne des répercussions neurobiologiques particulières; ainsi, l'écofiction est une ressource précieuse pour nourrir l'imagination sociale et le sentiment d'appartenance. Les principes des pédagogies de la nature sont évidents dans le roman d'écofiction Where the Crawdads Sing *de Delia Owen (v.f. :* Là où chantent les écrevisses*), publié en 2018, et ces principes peuvent être explorés à travers les trois activités suggérées.*

Keywords: ecocriticism, wild pedagogies, ecofiction, Delia Owens, ecopedagogy, post-secondary education, literature, environment, neurobiology of reading

Mots-clés : écocritique, pédagogies de la nature, écofiction, Delia Owens, écopédagogie, éducation postsecondaire, littérature, environnement, neurobiologie de la lecture

Introduction: Teaching in the Change Times

We are living in the Change Times. Unprecedented and ongoing environmental alterations caused by climate change and biodiversity loss make even the most routine assumptions about the ongoingness of human lives and lifestyles uncertain. These environmental instabilities throw the economic, technological, social, and familial lives of every human on the planet into uncertainty (Bendell, 2018; Bringhurst & Zwicky, 2018). We cannot take for granted that any human culture anywhere on the planet will be able to maintain their current lifestyle into the next few decades. These "disturbing times, mixed-up times, troubling and turbid times," as Haraway (2016, p. 1) describes them, call for a radical reassessment of the way we conceive of post-secondary pedagogical practice.

Growing numbers of young adults arrive for their first semester at post-secondary institutions knowing or sensing these deep uncertainties. Indeed, skyrocketing diagnoses of North American youth anxiety and depression (Twenge, 2000; Gabor Maté, 2015, personal communication) and alarming increases in youth suicide (Twenge et al., 2018) may be fuelled in part by this "knowing," whether it is conscious and located in the brain or somatic and sensed in the nervous system. Acknowledged or not, instability and uncertainty are discomforting facts of the present moment. Here in North America, we experience them in unpredictable weather patterns and the rising costs of unpredictable food crops. We sense them in teetering political systems, such as the rise of nationalism, the cults of personality-politicians, and the corporate corruption of democracy. As I write this, news sources are livestreaming simultaneous updates on China's coronavirus epidemic, Trump's impeachment, Brexit, and the unprecedented Australian bushfire season. But by the time you read this, we'll be barrelling headlong toward the next global shocks.

Of course, upheaval and change have always been features of life. Certainly, generations of Indigenous and Black people living in North America have faced catastrophic change and upheaval as whole communities, cultures, and ways of life have been obliterated by the forces of genocide, slavery, and systemic racism. The changes threatening the world today threaten to wipe out the fragile gains made by these and other groups. Environmental degradation exacerbates inequalities and affects every human, every ecosystem, every plant, every animal, every ocean, the earth's air, and more.

As an English instructor, I've taught a few thousand, culturally-diverse students at several post-secondary institutions in British Columbia. We've examined news articles and written essays about current events in high-level ESL and first-year composition and research classes. We've studied environmentally oriented novels, short stories, plays, and poems in first and second-year literature classes. Many of my first-year English students tell me they cannot stomach the news, including climate change news, and deliberately avoid it. They may be consumed with their own personal disasters, already literally twitching with

anxiety or else morose with depression that doctors chalk up to brain chemistry. Therapists Atkins and Snyder (2018) rightly suggest that we must understand "the messages of these symptoms as a call for a shift in values and world views" (p. 90). One of my recent students, a self-described "climate refugee," lost their home and community in a typhoon of anomalous strength. Another is grieving his childhood beaches in the Mauritian Islands as the rising sea eats up the shore. A number of domestic students have confided to me that they don't expect to reach old age because of the emerging climate catastrophe. One of these students announced to the class that she felt "hopeless" about the state of the environment and, therefore, didn't see the point in discussing it or reading about it. Those sitting next to her nodded in agreement.

At the other end of the spectrum, many of my students are brand new to the concept of global environmental concerns. Like most North American college instructors, I teach a large percentage of international students, the majority of whom are new arrivals to Canada and are full of hope about their bright futures. Educational systems in their home countries tend not to prioritize environmental learning. When asked to write about the best ways to address environmental problems in my composition classes, quite a few of these students recommend stopping the practice of throwing garbage out the car window—because it makes the streets "unattractive." Some have never been introduced to the concept of "the environment" as a topic, and most do not understand our species' complete interdependency on nature's systems and processes. Nonetheless, having grown up on countryside farms, many of them have rich ecological knowledges that can exceed that of domestic, urban students. For example, one of these students spent her entire childhood sleeping outdoors with her grandmother, listening to her tell stories about the stars. For her, childhood, storytelling, sleep, and familial love were deeply intwined with starlight.

These diverse student knowledges and uncertain life trajectories raise serious questions for me about the role, purpose, and ethics of leading post-secondary classes. How can I prepare young people for an unknowable future? What is the appropriate starting point? How do I weigh the need for hope against the need for honesty and adjustment to new realities? Abundant climate change and biodiversity loss data show that humanity's continued efforts to ameliorate and reduce environmental harms amount to far too little, far too late. In light of this reality, how can we prompt a radical shift in worldview so that the environmental harms of anthropocentrism are not accidentally replicated over and over? Might a reorientation toward social resilience, expressive communication, meaning making, social connection, and adaptation skills take precedence over the teaching of thesis statements, comma use, and citation style?

Some of these questions are too large to answer in a paper of this size. Nonetheless, post-secondary educators need some direction without delay. This paper argues that the literary field of ecocriticism, paired with wild pedagogies touchstones, supports diverse student groups in more holistic, joyful, creative,

adaptive, and socially imaginative educational practices that better prepare them for ongoing ecological uncertainties. While this effort originates in pedagogical concerns for the discipline of English, suggestions here may benefit a variety of disciplines.

I assert that the Change Times call for pedagogical practices that promote holistic learning, community building, ecological awareness, and adaptation skills. To start, post-secondary education must shift its focus from brain to whole being (Sean Blenkinsop, personal conversation, 2017). Students are navigating complex emotional responses to our changing world—denial, grief, anxiety, anger, hope, determination. They need learning environments that acknowledge this range of emotion. As much as we might wish it, we cannot resolve or completely allevieate their grief and anxiety; the facts of the climate emergency are real and increasingly evident in student experiences of wildfires, storms, floods, food shortages, and displaced peoples. Thus, a more compassionate, albeit emotionally challenging, path involves acknowledging difficult emotion, holding space for it, and working to build collective resilience.

Most Western post-secondary education is disconnected from the wisdom of the body. How—one might wonder—can somatic experience inform learning in a first-year English classroom? Typically, it rarely does. In the average English course, for example, students are expected to do little more than think and speak. Their bodily experience is largely considered irrelevant. However, the activities described later in this article show how somatic experiences can expand creativity, critical thinking, and literary comprehension.

Despite the gravity of the moment, numerous scholars and activists suggest paths forward that offer more personal authenticity, deeper meaning, stronger bonds, and greater joy (e.g., Akomolafe, 2020; Bendell, 2018; Jickling, 2018). Thus, while grief defines the present condition for many of us, the upending of our education system might nevertheless be undertaken with righteous satisfaction, healthy rebelliousness, and even playful defiance. Haraway (2016) urges us to "to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places" (p. 1). Harney and Moten (2013) call for wildness as a relief from and active resistance to unjust and irreparable systems of injustice. In following Bendell's lead (2018), our confrontation with personal and societal denial and grief may allow us to refocus "on truth, love and joy in the now" (p. 19). Akomolafe (2020) suggests we need the trickster now, and we need to allow "ourselves to do pleasurable things in the face of the storm."

Greater joy and more holistic selfhood are foundational for the Change Times' greatest pedagogical necessity: Students need help to imagine new ways of *being* in the world (Jickling et al., 2018). To truly address the anthropocentric fallacies of our post-secondary institutions, we must rethink all aspects of teaching from an ecocentric perspective. That is, we must rethink an earth-centred approach to education that prompts us to ask how the purpose, content,

and form of our classes and institutions support *all* life rather than just human life. This radical shift in our dominant pedagogical model would include valuing relationship over individuality and actively making room for the voices of the more-than-human in our pedagogical practices. Wherever possible, those new ways of being should also involve more joy, more freedom, and greater flourishing than standard education has allowed (Jickling et al., 2018). Because literature and storytelling launch us into an imaginative state and *illustrate* new ways of being, they can benefit many disciplines at this time.

Ecocriticism to the Rescue, Sort Of

The field of literary ecocriticism offers one potential pathway for expanding pedagogical practice in the Change Times, but it is embedded within the standard Western education system, which contains many unchecked assumptions and habits. Western education rewards competition over cooperation, individuality over interdependency, rights over responsibility, categorization over holism, and thinking over feeling. Like most university students, many ecocriticism students sit at solitary desks, competing for grades on individual assignments, emphasizing cognition rather than emotion or intuition. The unspoken values imparted through these Western-style lessons work well at supporting the culture of capitalism, consumerism, patriarchy, and anthropocentrism. Yet, in many of these classes, little or no attention is given to the colonization of wild nature required to build the post-secondary institutions within which to hold these ecocritical discussions (Sean Blenkinsop, personal conversation, 2016).

Ecocriticism emerged in the 1990s to examine the relationship between humans and non-human nature in literature, art, architecture, and related fields. The prominent ecocritic Greg Garrard (2012) suggests, "Ecocriticism has been preoccupied with pedagogy since its inception" (p. 1). The statement may be broadly true, particularly in the comparative, that is, compared to other literary subfields which hardly consider pedagogy at all. Yet, this pedagogical reflection in ecocriticism often doesn't go far enough in addressing the anthropocentric and individualistic foundations that give rise to unecological ways of being in the world. The field tends to orient from the Western ontology of individualism and still positions humans as the ultimate authorities, as the "knowledge holders," while more-than-humans are assumed to be passive objects to be studied.

Indeed, a great many ecocritics and ecocritical journals have little or no focus on teaching practices. Even those that do (e.g., Fassbinder et al., 2012; Garrard, 2012) largely make adjustments to current pedagogical practice rather than questioning foundational assumptions embedded within those practices. Yet unchecked foundational biases and modes of operation hamper the field's potential to truly transform education and offer young people new and better ways of being in the world. Jickling (2018) elucidates this point: "Education, as it is most often encountered—that is, inside, seated, standardized, and more-or-less still—is a work of abstraction and heavily, perhaps even oppressively,

mediated experiences" (p. x). Ecocriticism that is taught within the enclosure of a typical classroom, with traditional composition assignments, under the assumption of the isolation of the individual, and without requiring students to consider their own ecological position may unwittingly replicate harmful ideologies of the status quo.

Although scholars like Garrard (2012) have meaningfully interrogated the pedagogical possibilities of ecocriticism, the wild pedagogies conceptions carry the discussion farther and clarify a helpful theoretical framework from which to develop course-specific practices. In general, the field of ecocriticism contains scant discussion of the pedagogical *practices* that might decentre the human and attend to the voices of the more-than-human.

The authors of *Wild Pedagogies* (Jickling et al., 2018) articulate that in light of our current ecological emergency, "educators need to trouble the dominant versions of education that are enacted in powerful ways and that bend outcomes towards a human-centred and unecological *status quo*" (p. 1). This effort should involve all levels of education and all disciplines. While the discussion on the ecopedagogy of English is limited both in quantity and scope, environmental education has a long history of ecopedagogical development. However, as Garrard (2010) points out, the fields of literary ecocriticism and environmental education do not talk to each other. Garrard rightly acknowledges, "teachers of ecocriticism and environmental education researchers largely seem to work in mutual unawareness" of each other's work (p. 233). In addition to its other benefits, the wild pedagogies touchstones offer a helpful point of convergence.

Instructors of ecocriticism may spend enormous energy planning lesson content but overlook subtle messaging occurring through lesson *form*. In many ecocriticism classrooms, the physical separation of students from more-than-humans goes unacknowledged. For example, while land acknowledgement to Indigenous Nations is frequently offered, acknowledgement of the displaced animals, plants, water ways, and ecosystems likely isn't. Additionally, in the classroom, nuanced messages about compartmentalization, the isolation of the self, and social hierarchies may be imparted (Sean Blenkinsop, 2016, personal communication) along with the notion that *real* learning takes place in human-made spaces. Consequently, students are neither shaken from the institution's anthropocentric focus nor asked to consider their own participation in the colonization of the more-than-human realm. Even from a literary analysis perspective, entirely indoor ecocritical curriculum may be of reduced benefit because it inadvertently fosters overly-simplified conceptions of more-than-humans.

Researchers suggest the voices of the more-than-human world are actively oppressed by Western, industrial, and capitalistic cultural tendencies (e.g., Derby et al., 2015). Just as the anti-colonial movement has sought to listen to the voices of oppressed, marginalized, and overlooked peoples, so too has the wild pedagogies movement sought to listen to the oppressed, marginalized,

and overlooked voices of more-than-humans. What does the red maple tree on the campus lawn want? How does it manage its needs? How does it enact its agency? What messages might it bring to the ongoing ecocritical conversation?

Some scholars may dismiss the notion that trees and other more-than-humans have the capacity and right to communicate on their own behalf. To them, this claim veers close to "magical thinking" and resides outside acceptable scholarly practice. As Randy Laist (2013) explains, the typical urbanite sees plants as "a category of things that are alive like we are, but alive in a way that is utterly different, closed off from our capacity for empathy, omnipresent but unknown, seductive but unresponsive" (p. 14). The right and capacity of women, Blacks, and children with disabilities to communicate on their own behalf was once widely challenged too. It's fallacious to ignore more-than-human voices on the grounds that one feels odd or uncomfortable doing so—or that we should continue to treat more-than-humans as techno-industrial cultures have been, without risking re-evaluation. Protections for marginalized groups will always require discomforting reassessment of the world and humbling recognition of mistakes. Furthermore, individuals and cultures who have developed relationships with maple trees, alligator lizards, and glacial rivers attest that the more-than-human world can and does communicate and act on behalf of self and others in highly complex and compelling ways.

A Marriage of Ecocriticism and Wild Pedagogies Conceptions

Ecocritical courses guided by wild pedagogies conceptions shift students outside the classroom and its literal, yet invisible, anthropocentric framing. Wild pedagogies offers a pathway for: 1) decentring the human instructor, 2) relationship-building with the natural world, 3) holistic learning, 4) attending to cultural and experiential diversities, and 5) joyful and wild flourishing. These pedagogical practices are only "new" by dominant, Western educational standards; for example, Indigenous educational practices are innately holistic, experiential, relational, supportive of diversity, and born from the land (Ahenakew, 2017; Sheridan & Longboat, 2006; Marsden, 2019). Perhaps, as Sheridan and Longboat imply (2006), the immature relationship between settler culture and Turtle Island is slowly maturing into conceptions made available through the land itself. When ecocriticism is guided by wild pedagogies principles, post-secondary students benefit through enhanced capacity for creative thought, greater ecological self-awareness, and experiential ecocentric learning practices. Additionally, these principles support the "old growth" knowledges (Sheridan & Longboat, 2006, p. 366) inherent in the cultures of First Nations students, and, thus, work toward honouring these students and undoing white epistemological racism.

Fiction engages readers in important ways non-fiction cannot. Reading fiction triggers the imagination, allowing us to conceptualize simulations of the real world

and thus neurobiologically *experience* alternate realities. Reading fiction *is* a form of experiential and holistic learning. It stimulates new ideas, emotions, and bodily sensations, such as hormonal, blood pressure, and heart rate changes. The neural pathways and connections involved in imagining closely mirror actual experience (Lillard, 2013), thus providing a kind of "practice run" for future actions and experiences. Functional MRI scans of readers show that both fiction and non-fiction reading prompt neurological behaviour associated with observation of real-time events; however, fiction reading also prompts neurological activity associated with imagining future possibilities (Altmann et al., 2014).

Thus, ecocentric fiction enables students to both imagine *and* pseudo-experience new ways of being in the world. Mar and Oatley (2008) underscore this claim with their observations of the basic purpose of storytelling. They conclude that fiction functions like a kind of math, but whereas mathematical equations enable greater understanding of material reality, fictional narratives enable greater understanding of social realities. By extension, carefully chosen ecofiction also promotes greater understanding of ecological realities and students' ecological selves. That is, ecofiction prompts greater cosmological and environmental self-awareness.

When students read as a cohort and are guided by wild pedagogical principles, they also participate in communal imagination processes, which can be managed to promote cooperation, interdependency, and holism. Cognitively, readers tap into their own unique personal experiences when *mentalizing* a narrative—that is, when visualizing the sensory, social, and contextual aspects of a story. In a post-secondary context, student readers then share insights, questions, and observations with each other, thereby reassessing and refining their own mentalization of the narrative. They can then be encouraged to see themselves as collaborators in group imagination processes and to co-create a shared experience of the story. Benefiting from their own diverse backgrounds, participants co-imagine literary locales. Sharing neurocognitive experience and shaping group imagination builds community.

Of course, student discussions of fiction have as much potential to destroy peer communities as support them. Briefly, skillful guided discussion requires instructor honesty, as well as upfront and open discussion about 1) respectful listening, 2) the advantages of sharing diverse perspectives, 3) the right to err or change one's mind, and 4) the courage to be a "voice in the wild." Openly discussing these agreements builds trust and a feeling of mutual support before the first fiction discussion even arrives.

Collaborative discussions enable students to observe what *is* and collectively imagine what *could be*. Gosling and Case (2013) note that we need "social dreams" to confront and adapt to unthinkable environmental realities and possibilities (p. 705). They argue:

> Assuming the direst predictions of climate science are correct and the planet is, indeed, facing climate catastrophe, it becomes imperative for modern Western

> societies—and those peoples who aspire to emulate their lifestyles—to *imagine* this prospect. Such imaginings must be a prelude to any form of action taken to avert or prepare for the consequences ahead as humanity sits precariously on the edge of the abyss. (p. 706)

This assessment would seem to support the use of dystopian and apocalyptic fiction, which may 1) awaken students to discussions about the current realities and possible trajectories of environmental crisis, 2) allow stressed student readers an opportunity to experience and release pent-up emotion within the safety of make-believe realities, and 3) reassure students that the world is not currently in an apocalyptic state.

However, dystopian fiction, although popular with students and instructors of ecocriticism, poses a complicated starting point for diverse audiences and may heighten some students' anxieties and denials. Also, dystopian fiction may actually undermine efforts to mobilize students to protect environments. Schneider-Mayerson's survey of readers (2018) found that readers of dystopian fiction focused on "prepping" for apocalypse rather than being responsible ecological citizens or activists (p. 495). Schneider-Mayerson adds, "For many of these readers, we see evidence of the continuing individualization of environmental action and the emphasis on 'small and easy' actions" (p. 495).

For these reasons, I prefer to start with literature that is set in the recognizable world of *now*. Greater eco-awareness begins with students understanding how humans might relate differently to nature *now*. While the English literary canon is replete with examples of marginalized, misunderstood, and abused more-than-humans, some Indigenous novels, along with some newer settler literatures, immerse readers in rich and complex relationships with more-than-human characters. An abbreviated list of eco-novels might include the following: *Ceremony* (Silko, 1977); *Overstory* (Powers, 2018); and translated texts such as *The Blue Fox* (Sjón, 2003) and *Wolf Totem* (Rong, 2004).

Fiction's unique capacity to carry readers to similar emotional and cognitive spaces makes it an excellent starting point for classes with diverse student groups. As researchers note (Bal & Veltcamp, 2013; Mar et al., 2006), reading fiction activates empathy in ways that non-fiction does not. Empathetic engagement is key for shifting students out of the head-centred, hyper-individualized patterns of traditional Western thought and into relational orientations to the world. Together as a class and with the assistance of more-than-humans, they can create a shared community of ideas that is enhanced by divergent backgrounds in student populations and grounded in shared locale.

Listening to Crawdads Sing

An excellent ecocentric novel for these diverse student groups is Delia Owen's *Where the Crawdads Sing* (2018), which illustrates the possibilities inherent in a deep relationship with nature, ecocentric ways of learning, and more-than-human

sovereignty. With skilled discussion facilitation and wild pedagogies-inspired activities, the novel can be used to invite readers to reconsider, deepen, and appreciate their own ecological relationships. At a time when so many students are lonely, homesick, and/or friendless, the novel acknowledges the emotional pain of social isolation while carrying readers into a realm of rich and rewarding ecological relationships. In other words, its emotional starting point is one that even culturally diverse student groups relate to and appreciate.

Owen's novel illustrates ways of relating to animals, plants, and water that are likely both new and familiar to students. The novel's protagonist is a girl and young woman through most of the novel. [Spoiler Alert.] Like any human, she has certain social needs, yet she is unable to meet them after being abandoned by her family and shunned by the local community. She lives alone from the age of 13 in a shack by a saltwater marsh in North Carolina. The novel shows readers a multitude of deep and enduring relationships the protagonist, Kya, maintains with the more-than-humans around her. Aching from being abandoned by her mother, young Kya finds a maternal bond from the marsh itself. Owens writes:

> Sometimes [Kya] heard night-sounds she didn't know or jumped from lightning too close, but whenever she stumbled, it was the land who caught her. Until at last, at some unclaimed moment, the heart-pain seeped away like water into sand. Still there, but deep. Kya laid her hand upon the breathing, wet earth, and the marsh became her mother. (p. 34)

The marsh takes on the role of her comforting protector while, later on, waves and mayflies offer more playful encounters. In her late teens, her sexuality blooms. When she has no human to explore this budding side of herself, she plays with the small, foaming waves rolling into the marsh; she lies on the sand and waits for the cool, delicious tickle of the waves to reach her bare legs. As gentle as a young lover, the waves flirt against her legs and thighs, helping her discover the edges of her developing body. Later, she dances in the moonlight with the mayflies, indulging in the romantic beauty of night.

In a life of abandonment and lost loved ones, seagulls, stars, and marsh water become her family, her most reliable friends, her confidantes, her closest allies, and her saviours in varied, complex, spontaneous, and abiding ways. The local flock of seagulls and a curious red hawk pull her from a profound depression by reminding her she is not alone, she is not forgotten, she is connected to others, and she belongs. Students reading this novel can pseudo-experience these relationships too, perhaps relating them to their own experiences of nature or else imagining possible relationships. They can also share their real-life experiences in class and further expand the field of possible relationships for other students.

Additionally, the novel illustrates the wild pedagogies concept of nature as educator. Since the protagonist only attends school for a single—unsatisfying—day, the book viscerally decentres human educators. Nearly all of Kya's key

life lessons are grounded in her observations and interactions with more-than-humans. For example, the protagonist watches a flock of turkeys attack one of their own after it becomes "different" (p. 90). She comprehends that group survival and conformity motivate this action. Later that day, when the local boys taunt her with the name "Marsh Girl," she readily recognizes the psychological underpinnings of their actions. Like the turkey flock, they too are fearful of "difference" and imagine it might taint them. Kya understands that the boys are functioning on instinct; their animosity is far less personal than it appears.

Readers also witness how a lesson from fireflies eventually saves Kya's life—if not her literal life, certainly the sanctity of her lifestyle. The female firefly uses deceptive courtship signals—flashing light—for self-preservation by luring a male firefly of different species into becoming her dinner. Later on, Kya enacts this knowledge at a human level when she sends false signals of availability to the man who intends to beat and rape her. Only through sacrificing his life in self-defence is she able to preserve her own.

The novel bears witness to the agency of many more-than-humans and gives them space on the page for voice, thus indirectly decentring the human. For example, through Kya's observations, readers understand how the sycamore tree assesses the seasons and subsequently adjusts itself to oncoming winter. Similarly, tides, seagulls, and others act on their own behalf in a far more active manner than more-than-humans in most other English language novels. The author, a zoologist by training, actively works to decolonize the more-than-human realm by giving space and voice to the more-than-humans, as well as by illustrating the intelligence, creativity, and agency of their cultures.

Furthermore, the novel shows readers how human knowledge can be mediated through and positively synthesized with more-than-human knowledges, creating robust, holistic knowledges. When some students first encounter the concept of ecocentrism, they mistakenly believe it to be anti-human. Owen's novel helpfully illustrates how human knowledges can positively support and are inexorably entwined with more-than-human knowledges. Kya's existence, unlike many of ours, does not reside on a binary of human and more-than-human. She lives an ecocentric lifestyle in which the human realm is simply part of a greater whole. Rather late in childhood, she learns how to read human words—long after she learns the tides, the patterns of clouds, and the flight paths of seabirds. She perceives words and sentences as "seeds" that are both "exposed" and "secret," and which have great power to grow (p. 113). Her newfound discovery of reading—and eventually, poetry writing—allows her greater depth of understanding about plants, animals, and air and their processes. In this way, a symbiosis of knowledges takes place since increased human knowledge eventually allows her to articulate, to other humans, needed protections for the marsh. Thus, the novel suggests the possibility of a positive interdependency between human writing skills and more-than-human ecologies—a provocative concept for literature students to explore.

Lastly, the novel embraces the wild pedagogies concept of the sensual, flourishing freedom of wildness. The title, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, hints that somewhere beyond the confines of the contemporary human world, the more-than-humans and even the humans can be truly free—and that this freedom may unleash hidden potentials, talents, and joys. This too is the message of the wild pedagogies movement: A movement toward wildness is a movement toward greater capacity to be one's full self instead of the partial-selves the "civilized world" sometimes demands (Jickling et al., 2018, p. 104). In essence, it is a call to protect and seek out inner (self) and outer (Nature) wilderness and wildness and recognize their intertwining.

Kya appreciates these nuances between confinement and freedom. The pretty girls from town are admired by the boys, unlike her, but they must also conform to outer standards of beauty and femininity. Under these constraints, they become slightly less beautiful, less capable, less talented, less authentic, and much less free. Boys are similarly shackled with conventions of manhood and normativity. One young man temporarily severs his love for Kya in order to fit in, causing himself enormous emotional pain. Even from a distance, Kya suffers from the human world. Yet, surrounded by the wild marshland, she has enviable freedom to simply *be* and to unfold into *becoming*.

Wild Pedagogy Activities for Sensory and Somatic English Lessons

Wild pedagogy experiences enable students to develop meaningful relationships with the more-than-humans. They also create spaces for more-than-humans to be active co-teachers within the field of ecocriticism. This shift occurs when the human instructor actively steps back to allow more-than-humans to communicate directly with students. In first and second-year English classes, students need not be told of the nature-as-co-teacher concept. In fact, it may be better not to raise confusing expectations and instead let experience lead the way. Happily, the richness of engaging with nature in this way cannot be predicted in advance. One day recently, I took an ecocritical class outside to the city college lawn, and—remarkably—twenty-two bald eagles circled over our heads.

When students have the opportunity to listen to the voices of the more-than-human world, they not only deepen their own ecological awareness, they are better positioned to engage in meaningful ecocritical analysis as well. The student who has learned to listen, who recognizes the agency, complexity, and fascination of the more-than-human realm, is better poised to discuss, for example, the way water stores memory in *Where the Crawdads Sing*. Conversely, a student who has remained indoors during their study may retain flat, two-dimensional notions of "tree," "fox," and "marsh."

What follows are three wild pedagogies activities that provide sensory and somatic engagement: sensory engagement; deep listening; and cosmology diary.

Sensory Engagement

This is a good starting point activity for students with diverse needs and ecological experiences. Students are asked to find some space of wildness to carefully observe each day for a week. Initially, students can just observe, without recording, for 20 minutes—a doable amount of time for typically overworked students. Given that most post-secondary institutions are established in cities, the "wild" space may be as simple as a patch of sky, a local community of crows, or the weeds at the edge of a park. This seemingly simple exercise might be enhanced by students' own ecological awareness, but it is specifically inclusive of students who may have had exceedingly little contact with wild nature. The primary goal of this initial activity is simply to turn toward the more-than-human world and away from the human one. Garrard (2012) notes that students "are less able to detect and assess misrepresentations" of the more-than-human world "without direct experience of their originals" (p. 5).

Beyond enhancing critical reading capacity, this exercise also supports somatic learning—which is so often overlooked in English classrooms. We think differently and arrive at different ideas when the wind is blowing through our hair, the sunlight is patterning through the leaves, and parades of clouds are crossing overhead. Summarizing the work of multiple researchers, Atkins and Snyder (2018) explain that beauty, such as the natural beauty of the outdoors, offers "nourishment for the soul," inspires "serenity and exhilaration," and promotes "self-organization" through mathematical harmonies (p. 69). Thinking in the outdoors also promotes creativity by offering more complex visual stimuli (Sean Blenkinsop, 2019, personal communication) and allowing for the whole body, and not just the brain, to register and initiate ideas. Furthermore, because exposure to nature spaces—especially wild ones—can also enhance the immune system, reduce anxiety, and alleviate depression (Kuo, 2015), students may have greater access to cognitive resources.

Deep Listening

Building on the sensory engagement activity, students might be invited to partake in deep listening (Piersol, 2014). Students are asked to listen to a more-than-human—who is calling them?—to turn toward that entity with mindful listening. They might, for example, turn to the night stars, a tree on their street, a spider on the windowsill. This activity begins similarly to sensory engagement but with a progression that fosters relationship. Day 1— only listen. Listen to the communications occurring, for example, between stars and space, light and dark, solid matter and gas/dark matter. Consider dialogue and listening as multisensory processes. That is, dialogue can be auditory, tactile, chemical, visual, etc. Day 2 — listen and write down detailed observations, without judgements or anthropocentric characterizations. Day 3 — listen and try to answer the question, *What does this being want? Try to truly listen with empathy but without tainting with human projections*.

Cosmology Diary

A final step or activity to try with a more advanced ecocritical group is the development of a cosmology diary. Students are asked to keep a journal of their personal reflections on cosmology, ecophilosophy, and developing ecological awareness. As much as possible, students should write outdoors; however, in extreme weather, they can witness the outdoors from an interior space.

They may be asked to address questions such as the following: *What is connected? What is disconnected? Does your life have meaning? How so? Or, why not? Does the life of the dandelion/bottle fly/snow next to you have meaning? How so? Or, why not? In what ways are you connected to the dandelion/bottle fly/snow? How do your purposes or existences intersect, intertwine, influence one another? Who is responsible for whom? Why?* Additional questions might include: *In what ways have you been domesticated or constrained? What is the wildness inside you that might "sing" if you were beyond the boundaries of the human realm? Describe the nature of your relationships with trees, animals, and weather. Who, in the more-than-human world, has taught you and what was the lesson?* This is a fluid list of ideas and certainly each instructor can tailor their questions to specific locales, cultural contexts, and student needs. Students can then be asked to share their answers in groups.

Conclusion: Preparing for the Unknown

Bringing wild pedagogies concepts to ecocriticism can offer a holistic, ecocentric alternative to status quo models of learning that inadvertently reinforce toxic anthropocentric behaviour. This pedagogical pairing also supports vastly divergent student experiences of the environment. Indigenous students may feel an increased sense of belonging and support for their traditional ways of knowing. The student who has felt "hopeless" may find joy and renewal, while the environmentally-unaware student may be gently turned toward the more-than-human realm. The students experiencing solastalgia (longing for lost environments) develop new relationships with new locales, while many students become aware of the colonization of nature's spaces. These activities develop ecological self-awareness and a shift away from institutionalized anthropocentrism, and they normalize the sovereignty of the more-than-human realm.

Ecofiction launches students into imaginative experience—with one eye on the observable realities of our world and one on possible futures. With well-chosen ecofiction, this imaginative pseudo-experience can enable students to adapt to a rapidly shifting world. To understand, better prepare for, and hopefully slow down destructive changes in the environment, young adults need to learn how to listen deeply and value more-than-human agency.

The activities outlined above also allow students to turn more toward each other and, thereby, build communities of new knowledge and shared vision. With

skilled facilitation, they can recognize that differences—whether in ecosystems or groups of students—can be mutually supportive and strengthening. Through their shared and co-created experience of story, students become more relationally oriented, and foster individual and group resilience. Although the wild pedagogy-ecocriticism pairing is guided by environmental priorities, research suggests student mental health and physical well-being will likely benefit from increased outdoor time too (e.g., Kuo, 2015; Narvaez, 2014; Roszak, 1992).

Future research might question how the structure, organization, and design of writing can be guided by "ecological principles" (Englehardt & Schraffenberger, 2015, p. 473). Traditional English essays are largely structured for reader efficiency, to allow for skimming and quick consumption. But, from an ecological perspective, efficiency and consumption are problematic features. Investigations into new compositional styles might look to Tsing's book chapters, blooming like "flushes of mushrooms" (Tsing, 2015, p. viii), Kimmerer's stories, woven like sweetgrass (Kimmerer, 2013), and Powers's old growth interdependencies (*Overstory*, 2018).

Notes on Contributor

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