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What's Next? Ecoliteracies and creative writing

Introduction



Covid has changed everything. Since its spread in early 2020, we have experienced paradigm shifts in the way we live, learn and work together. Precipitated by a terrible virus, multiple crises are happening at once: a tsunami of political, economic, social, environmental and educational calamities. Like a complex weather system, these disasters interlinked in both obvious and subtle ways.

Yet, there are glimmers of hope. There is a renewed awareness of the importance of education. Recently, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCOa 2021) launched a Futures of Education: Learning to Become Initiative (UNESCOb 2021) which invites us to consider what the priorities of education should be (UNESCOc 2021). At

Goldsmiths, staff in the Centre for Language, Culture and Learning met to consider the 'Futures of Education' key questions, which are:

Topic 1: Our changing world: How do you view the future?

- Please imagine the future in broad terms. When you think about 2050 ...
- What are you most hopeful about?
- What are you most concerned about?

Topic 2: Broad Purposes of Education

- Considering the visions of 2050 that you just described ...
- What should be the collective purposes of education in 2050?

It was difficult to imagine what the world might be like in 2050, but we did our best. One idea that emerged was that what are termed 'ecoliteracies' will be important to nurture in all educational settings.

This article will explore what ecoliteracies involve, and argue passionately for its core concepts, suggesting that creative writing can play a central role in supporting them.

What are ecoliteracies and why nurture them?



There are a few components to 'ecoliteracy' which include:

1. Ecological awareness
2. Thinking about language, learning and culture an ecological fashion, by viewing society as an ecosystem (Barton 2007; Creese & Martin 2003; Hornberger 2003; Mühlhäusler 2020)

Let's explain both concepts in more depth.

First, being ecoliterate is about developing an awareness of the ways in which the environment shapes human culture and how it moulds the environment. Becoming ecoliterate is about

developing an 'ecology of mind' (Bateson 1972) which involves thinking beyond our own immediate selfish interests – how will this benefit me? – to looking at fostering sustainable ecological environments – how will this benefit all of us and our world?

Second, ecoliteracy is a specialist linguistic term which the literacy expert David Barton suggested can 'provide a framework for discussions of literacy' (Barton 2007: 32). Barton's prescient study *Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language* (2007) details in some depth how an 'ecology of written language' might help us better understand how literacy works. He writes:

Originating in biology, ecology is the study of the interrelationship of an organism and its environment. When applied to humans, it is the interrelationship of an area of human activity and its environment. It is concerned with how the activity – literacy in this case – is part of the environment and at the same time influences and is influenced by the environment. An ecological approach takes as its starting point this interaction between individuals and their environments. (Barton 2007: 31)

Rather than isolating literacy activities from everything else in order to understand them, an ecological approach aims to understand how literacy is embedded in other human activity, its embeddedness in social life and in thought, and its position in history, in language and in learning. Ecological will be used in these several senses. (Barton 2007: 34)

Barton and like-minded researchers such as Mühlhäusler (2020), Creese & Martin (2003) and Hornberger (2003), take an ecological view of language, learning and human culture. For them, language is always emerging and interconnected, constantly forming ecological linguistic and cultural 'niches', which must be studied in an ecological fashion. So ecoliteracies are not only a 'prescription' – an injunction to consider how all our actions are impacting the environment – but also provide us with useful 'descriptions'. Barton writes:

The ecological metaphor actually produces a whole set of terms which can provide a framework for discussions of literacy. Terms like ecological niches, ecosystem, ecological balance, diversity and sustainability can all be applied to the human activity of using reading and writing. Some of the ideas in books on biological ecology are worth exploring to see how far the metaphor can be taken: for example, that communities themselves are not self-perpetuating or reproductive, individuals are; that the structure and patterns in a community are the product of processes at the level of the individual. (Barton 2007: 32)

At this time of crisis, encouraging ecoliteracies is useful. Ecoliteracies can help us better consider creative solutions to the climate crisis and many other problems. Teaching people ecoliteracies should involve doing much more than making them aware of the biological facts about ecology; it should help them respond resourcefully to their lived experiences of being in the world. Ecoliterate pedagogies teach people to flourish in sustainable ways.

Creative writing can help in this regard; it can forge new modes of thinking about the environment and gives us the space 'to grow' creative solutions in ways in which possibly other forms of writing do not.

How do you nurture ecoliteracies using creative writing and how might they help people?



Figure 1 The River Derwent in Cockermouth, where Wordsworth grew up

Creative writing is uniquely placed to nurture ecoliteracies for a few reasons.

First, there is a wealth of 'ecoliterate' literature to draw upon as sources of inspiration. Most nature poetry from different eras and countries promotes ecoliteracies. For example, Wordsworth's poetry stresses the interconnectedness of nature and children. He writes in 'The Prelude' (1799):

—Was it for this

That one, the fairest of all Rivers, lov'd

To blend his murmurs with my Nurse's song,
And from his alder shades and rocky falls,
And from his fords and shallows, sent a voice
That flow'd along my dreams? For this, didst Thou,
O Derwent! travelling over the green Plains
Near my 'sweet Birthplace', didst thou, beauteous Stream
Make ceaseless music through the night and day
Which with its steady cadence, tempering
Our human waywardness, compos'd my thoughts
To more than infant softness, giving me,
Among the fretful dwellings of mankind,
A knowledge, a dim earnest, of the calm
That Nature breathes among the hills and groves. (Wordsworth 1799)

Notice here how the ecology of the river Derwent – 'his alder shades and rocky falls', 'fords', 'shallows' – blends together to create a 'voice' which gives the young poet 'a knowledge, a dim earnest, of the calm/That Nature breathes'. Read today, the poem challenges the reader to see nature differently from the Darwinian vision of it being 'red in tooth and claw' (Tennyson 1850: Canto 56). Wordsworth's Romantic sensibility is possibly more in tune with modern biological thinking, which perceives the earth as a co-operative ecological system (Zelenski et al. 2015) and that 'exposure to nature may increase cooperation' and help us deal with 'social dilemmas, sustainable intentions and behavior' (Zelenski et al. 2015: 24).

This is how the two understandings of 'ecoliteracies' come together – one more descriptive – the other more creative and inspirational.

At Goldsmiths, where I lecture, Professor Jonathan Freeman has worked with a video maker Anna Stewart (2020) to produce 3 Dimensional videos on YouTube which attempt to replicate the soothing effects of nature. Does watching such videos make us care more about the environment and ourselves? Exciting early results show that possibly even exposure to a video like the one below can have beneficial effects upon your mood. The video is interactive in that you can click on it and move around in the space, simulating to a certain extent, the feeling of being in nature:

https://youtu.be/uc8_GQwllJg

The creative writing teacher has a place to play here in taking forward some of these new research findings. It may well be worth seeing how watching videos can be dovetailed with

creative writing exercises. Using the video as a stimulus for freewriting could result in some surprising outcomes. Peter Elbow, the guru in of 'freewriting', observes:

THE most effective way I know to improve your writing is to do freewriting exercises regularly. At least three times a week. They are sometimes called "automatic writing," "babbling," or "jabbering" exercises. The idea is simply to write for ten minutes (later on, perhaps fifteen or twenty). Don't stop for anything. Go quickly without rushing. Never stop to look back, to cross something out, to wonder how to spell something, to wonder what word or thought to use, or to think about what you are doing. (Elbow 1998: 3)

Freewriting is a form of ecoliteracy because it enables the writer to start building an ecological picture of their mind and world. It embraces potentially everything you can verbalize. Elbow argues that using freewriting as a foundation to practice, you can both 'grow' (Chapter 2) and 'cook' (Chapter 3) as a writer. He contends that many pedagogical models for teaching writing are wrong because they presume that we have thoughts that we then put down on paper. This is incorrect in his view. He writes:

This idea of writing is backwards. That's why it causes so much trouble. Instead of a two-step transaction of meaning into-language, think of writing as an organic, developmental process in which you start writing at the very beginning— before you know your meaning at all— and encourage your words gradually to change and evolve. (15)

The model here then is an 'ecoliterate' one in that it perceives writing as part of ecological process; it is 'organic', and freewriting should be utilized so that the writer encourages 'words to gradually change and evolve' (15). Elbow illustrates that writing involves the writer realizing that they have changed because of writing. In writing about a subject, the writer frequently perceives something that they had not seen before:

Strictly speaking, only you have grown, your words have not. You are a living organism. Your words are just dead marks on a piece of paper. No word has moved or changed, they all just lie there where you set them. But there's a sense in which they have changed. A sense in which they are not one long string of words but rather three shorter strings of words which are three "versions" of something: versions of an organism-like thing— something that has gone through three stages and ended up in a way that seems completed. "It no longer believes X, it believes Y; it's very different, yet it's still the same piece of writing. I never would have expected it to end up this way." (23)

Elbow's advice is simple but very powerful and underpinned by a growing body of evidence that freewriting can uniquely aid thinking, reflecting and learning (Bolton 2014).

For Elbow, 'Cooking is the smaller process: bubbling, percolating, fermenting, chemical interaction, atomic fission' (48). The metaphors he uses here are not ones drawn from 'nature' in the way his growing metaphors are, but are still ecoliterate in that Elbow argues for sustainable ways of intermingling. 'Cooking to write' involves bringing people, ideas, words, metaphors, genres together and watching them interact. For example, a teacher could nurture ecoliteracies by using 'cooking to write' strategies. This could involve two people discussing their thoughts about ecoliteracies which leads them to form a plan to write in an ecoliterate

fashion: they might decide to freewrite after or during a visit to a natural setting; they might agree to write list poems of what their senses feel in certain situations.

To sum up here, there are two major points.

First, freewriting is an ecoliteracy. It gives the writer a chance to form an ecology of mind because they can write anything.

Second, ecoliterate metaphors can clarify writing processes and help shape ecoliterate activities. Seeing writing as a form of growth and cooking can aid writers' perceptions on how and why they might do certain writing activities.

Creative writing activities that nurture ecological understanding



Creative writing has been used to explore many aspects of the climate emergency. The Poetry Society has listed several fascinating and sobering projects on their Poetry & Climate Change webpage (The Poetry Society 2021). One of the most striking of these projects was 'I am the Universe: Writing environmental catastrophe' (The Poetry Society: 2017). Here, the poet and adventurer Helen Mort judged the entries written by people under 25 about human beings' interconnectedness with nature and wrote her own commissioned piece about the changing face our planet 'The Library of Ice'. The poems are ecoliterate in that they perceive the multiple

ironies, sadnesses, joys, and epiphanies which writing about nature now involves. I was struck by the poem by James Tierney in this regard, 'They Came for the Shale' (2017: 11). The first verse reads:

The sparrow your dad loves to watch
pick seeds from the bottom of the garden
is getting too hot to fly.
It's pecking at its own feathers in some attempt
at relief.

The images here open up the possibility for better understanding of the small joyful and melancholic moments that the climate emergency generates; the sparrow can't fly anymore because of the heat, and is 'pecking at its own feathers'. The image illustrates poignantly how global warming destroys ecologies in an attempt 'at relief'.



Climate Museum UK is a 'mobile and digital museum stirring and collecting responses to the climate and ecological emergency' (Climate Museum UK 2021). They provide a number of different workshops which help people respond creatively to the climate emergency and include creative writing in many of them. We hosted one of these workshops 'virtually' at Goldsmiths in November 2020. The workshop leaders, two of the museum's founders, led a series of guided meditations to help us visualize and feel our connection with the earth, and set a series of

creative writing exercises. Importantly, threaded through the workshop was the question 'where do we go from here?', which speaks to a 'forward-looking' as opposed to a pessimistic perspective. The approach was research-informed and creative. At appropriate moments, the science revealing the depths of our 'earth crisis' was mentioned, but at others, we were asked to use the tools of creative writing – freewriting, poetry, writing in role etc – to reimagine our ecological relationships. This is an important aspect of developing ecoliteracies; the ability to draw upon the discourses of diverse disciplines to understand our ourselves and our relationship to the world.

Creative writing develops ecoliteracies because it embraces so many different discourses and standpoints. For example, in the Climate Museum UK workshop, we were asked to write from a different perspective about the earth. I wrote a short piece personifying the sun:

Every day, every second, I visit a strange planet, dominated by fleshly beings, riding in metal boxes and locking themselves in big brick caves. I brought them to life, but they don't really appreciate me. Instead they dig obsessively into the earth that depends upon them.

I stroke them, I burn them, I hide from them. Eventually, I will obliterate them.

Writing this piece gave me a sense of the immensity of the sun and time, and I found it curiously therapeutic writing it. I wanted to acknowledge the violence and destruction involved in natural processes and not shy away from this.

For another exercise, we were asked to write a poem about our connection with the environment, focusing upon a place special to us. I wrote this poem:

Two huge trees stand on the horizon
The crows flap their wings into its branches
A grave lurks underneath the trees
My grandparents are dead but are not buried there
They are part of the wind
But the trees stand there as testament to them
Granny and Grandpa, are you there?

Writing such verse supported me to become more ecoliterate because it helped me link the natural environment and the death of my grandparents. It gave me the room to see how the tree-topped hill near where they used to live contained their spirit.

I highlight this because it shows how creative writing can provide a psychic space for people to find the inter-connection between things, a key component of being ecoliterate.

Next steps: Ecoliteracies and lines of flight

The Covid pandemic has reminded us how the earth's struggling ecosystem, weakened by industrialization, mechanized travel, pollution and rapid climate change, has responded with the emergence of new deadly viruses. Covid-19 has sent human beings scurrying indoors and avoiding in-person contact as much as possible. This has brought a renewed interest in how online platforms might generate well-being and caring for the environment more generally. It was fascinating to note at the NAVE online conference this March just how many talks and workshops focused upon the environment and well-being.

There's a considerable body of evidence that being in natural surroundings can help people feel better. Richardson et al. (2016) showed that people who spent 30 days in nature:

were found to have sustained increases in happiness, health, connection to nature and pro-nature behaviours. With the improvement in health being predicted by the improvement in happiness, this relationship was mediated by the change in connection to nature (1)

Another intriguing piece of research showed that students who practised mindfulness (breathing meditations, mindful movement etc) in nature also reported improvements in their well-being (Howell et al. 2011). More recently, the University of Exeter and the BBC have launched some innovative research into 'Soundscapes for Wellbeing', 'aiming to connect audiences with the nature through creative TV, radio, and online programming' (University of Exeter 2021). Anyone over 18 can take part, it only takes a few moments. I enjoyed watching the nature video (BBC 2021) but found the music a bit 'ersatz' and the pictures a little too Disney for my tastes but nevertheless I certainly felt better after watching it for a short period of time. I also noticed how it helped me write more fluently immediately after watching it.

Interacting with representations of nature online is a complex process. Professor Gabi Budach of the University of Luxembourg, who specializes in multisensory learning and linguistics, shows in her research with stop-motion artist Gohar Sharoyan (co-author of the research and artist), how natural objects like carrots can be used to create stop-motion animations which facilitate learning and meaning-making. While considerations of well-being are important in this research, the emphasis is slightly different; it seeks to explore the ways in which animating objects using digital tools, such as stop-motion software, can nurture powerful insights into ourselves and develop feelings of empathy and connection. However, it is clear that using digital tools in this way certainly seems to improve well-being. Budach & Sharoyan write:

We want to understand how engagement with objects in animation making creates connection and how this connection is entangled with identity (Jenkins, 2014) transforming perspectives of the self and others. We posit that such insights, gained from experimentation with materials, have the potential to transcend into relationships with humans too. Ultimately, we seek to understand whether and how 'animating objects' has the power to teach us empathy and a more caring, respectful approach towards perspectives other (471)

Gohar Sharoyan makes vegetables become 'actors' and 'dancers'. A new relationship with nature is established through the use of digital tools and creative narrativising. Using the concepts of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) to understand what was happening when animating carrots, Budach and Sharoyan show how using hands, objects, cameras, software and screens come together to create an 'unconscious knowing from personal embodied experience, rather than conscious planning' (474). This is a fascinating finding because common sense would suggest that digital technologies separate us off from our bodies, attach us to a disembodied 'screen life' and lead to 'conscious planning' in that they appear so schematic and robotic. But Budach and Sharoyan illustrate how bringing together an 'assemblage' – to use a term from Deleuze and Guattari (1987) – of the human, objects, software and screen can lead to intuitive understanding and release us from our conscious modes of thinking. Ecoliteracy is developed through this assemblage because these things work together to create a new thing. Budach and Sharoyan demonstrate that this sort of playing with objects breaks down traditional artistic, natural and scientific hierarchies. The carrot animation is a 'line of flight' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) away from normalized modes of thinking and creating. The phrase 'line of flight' comes from the French. It's important to bear in mind Deleuze and Guattari's translator's note:

Both words translate *fuite*, which has a different range of meanings than either of the English terms. *Fuite* covers not only the act of fleeing or eluding but also flowing, leaking, and disappearing into the distance (the vanishing point in a painting is a point de fuite). It has no relation to flying. (Deleuze & Guattari 2004: xvi)

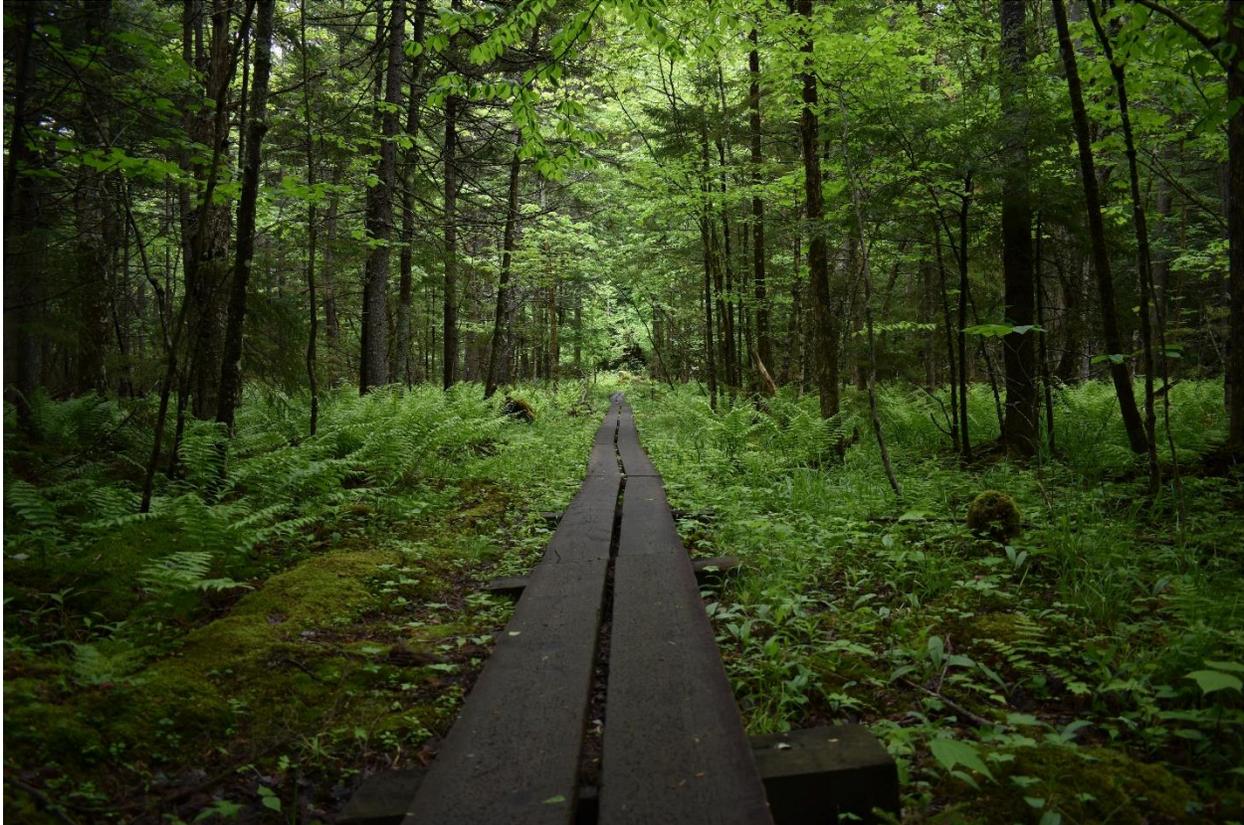


Figure 2 Lines of flight: the French word 'Fuite' (flight) covers not only the act of fleeing or eluding but also flowing, leaking, and disappearing into the distance. It has no relation to flying. Here we see a path taking a line of flight through a wood into a vanishing point.

Creating art in the way Budach and Sharoyan suggest is democratic because with a little guidance and the right equipment most people can do it within a few minutes, and it helps the participants and viewers make surprising connections.

Budach and Sharoyan conclude by saying:

We believe that 'animating objects' as explained in the text and as a hierarchy flat exploration of difference can be usefully transferred into other domains of intercultural communication, education and beyond. We judge that such moves are beneficial and strongly needed to contribute towards fairer, more inclusive and socially just practices in education and intercultural communication. There is a need to approach and explore 'difference' in new ways, and 'animating objects' seems to offer one such way (479)

These are important points for creative writers to consider because like Sharoyan and Budach they could create 'lines of flight' in similar ways. Creative writers could see whether playing with objects and photography/video in this way inspires them to think and write differently; their writing could be included in these animations as captions possibly, and a new creative writing assemblage could be created, assemblages like stop-motion poems and vegetable stories.

Bridget McKenzie of the Climate Museum UK believes that we should think beyond the term ecoliteracies and consider the concept of ecocapacities. She writes:

I prefer to use the term 'capacities' rather than 'literacy' to describe skills and knowledge (e.g. in any domain or across a curriculum) because it's...more capacious. The movement for ecological literacy (or [ecoliteracy](#)) has been hugely valuable and influential, but I think that the term 'literacy' is potentially limiting to cognitive and, more specifically, verbal forms of learning. (McKenzie 2021)

Her diagram for ecocapacities is illuminating (and fully explained in her article cited above):

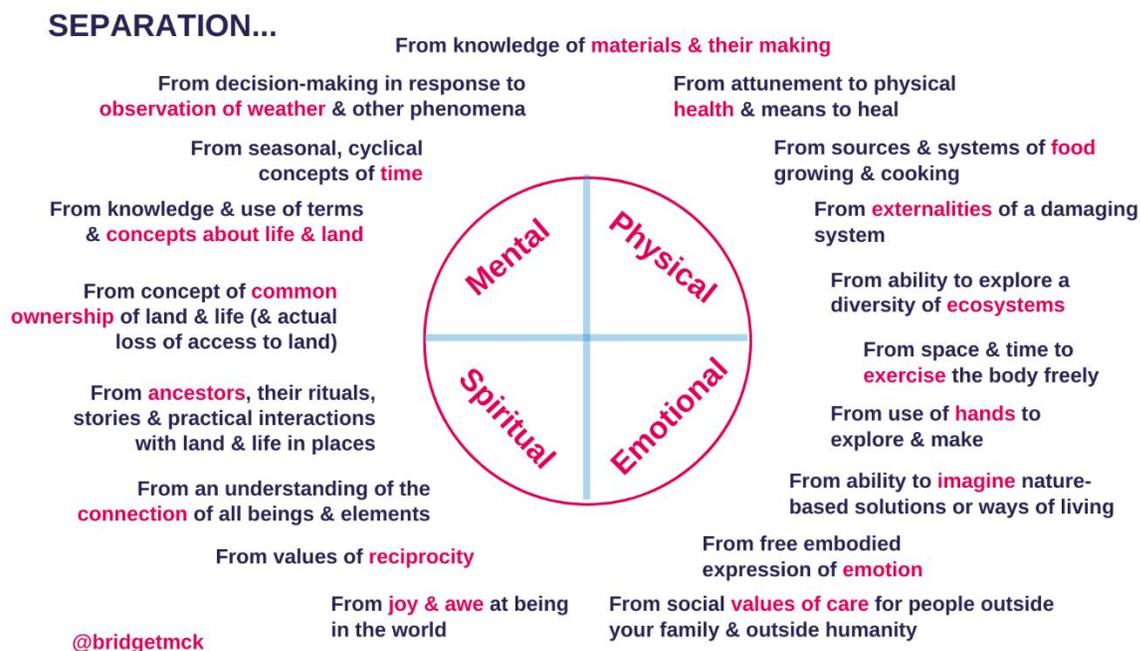


Figure 3 A diagram of what ecocapacities involve

McKenzie's vision of ecocapacities is a diagrammatic shape poem and invites creative writers to develop their own ecocapacity diagrammatic shape poems as well: poems about connection, reciprocity, common ownership, weather, care and so on.

Being a locked-down Londoner as I write this article, I have taken to writing by hand in parks when I can. Parks develop our ecocapacities and ecoliteracies: they are modern 'breathing spaces'. For me, not enough research has focused upon people's lived experiences of parks; their daily interactions with them, the epiphanies people have drinking coffee by the local pond, taking their children to the playground and so on. Even less research has looked at online representations of parks and the benefits to people in interacting virtually with their local parks. Creative writers have an important role to play in writing about ecocapacities: we need more stories, poems and reflections about the pandemic and our relationship to the world to help us better understand its mystery and terror.

Social justice can be forgotten when discussing wellbeing and ecologies, but it is a profoundly important factor to consider. In the introduction to *The Wretched Earth: Botanical Conflicts and Artistic Interventions* (2018), Dr Ros Gray and Shela Sheikh write:

Landscapes and vegetation are not simply the backdrop against which violence and dispossession unfold, but are mobilised as the very medium of violence, whether this be through the above-mentioned scorched earth tactics, or through the role of planting and environmental remodelling – including the enclosure of territory in the name of environmental conservation – in land grabbing and dispossession (164)

This perception is very relevant when thinking about the earth and our parks specifically. The environmental ‘remodelling’ that was involved in creating them and maintaining them is important to ‘unearth’, as it were. Furthermore, Gray and Sheikh note (2018) the ownership and utilization of so-called ‘public’ land like parks is often contentious. Why, for example, are so many parks used to host private, money-paying events such as fairs, concerts etc. when enshrined in many of their founding principles was the notion that they were ‘free’? The creative writer is in a unique position to show in an emotional and aesthetic way the impact that these iniquities have upon people by shaping narratives which illustrate the ways in which violence and dispossession have stripped people of their natural rights. To a certain extent science fiction has always done this – witness the blasted futuristic landscapes in so many sci-fi films. Recently though, some of our most powerful novels like Richard Powers’ *The Overstory* (2019), Kiran Millwood Hargave’s *The Girl of Ink and Stars* (2016), and Wu Ming-Yi’s *The Man with the Compound Eyes* (2018) have focused specifically on environmental justice in very powerful ways.

Conclusion

So, what is next for creative writers and creative writing educators in terms of their relationship with environmental matters?

This article argues that a focus upon ecoliteracies will grow, and that creative writing has an inimitable part to play in making everyone more ecoliterate.

Creative writing can be used to foster people’s ecoliteracies in many ways. The process of researching and writing creatively about the environment can help people better understand the facts and be used to explore serious ecological research. We saw this happening with the ‘I am the Universe’ Poetry Society project. It can also help people try to answer the question ‘where do we go from here?’ in imaginative ways as we saw with the Climate Museum UK’s creative writing workshop.

Earlier this year in January 2021, Joe Biden was inaugurated as the 46th President of the United States; his administration aims to tackle the climate crisis much more stridently than previous ones. His wife, Jill Biden, the First Lady, continues to teach writing at the university where she

works. From NAWE's perspective, this is welcome news. Maybe she will assist her husband by nurturing ecoliteracies in her students?

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Biography

Francis Gilbert was a teacher for twenty-five years in various UK state schools. He is the author of many books, including *I'm A Teacher*, *Get Me Out Of Here* (2004), *Analysis and Study Guide: Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (2015), *The Mindful English Teacher* (2018) and *Snow on the Danube* (2019). He is now a senior lecturer in education at Goldsmiths, University of London, where he is the course leader for [PGCE English](#) and the head of the [MA in Creative Writing and Education](#). He is a member of the Higher Education Committee of the National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE) and a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

<http://www.francisgilbert.co.uk/>

<https://www.gold.ac.uk/educational-studies/staff/gilbert/>

Twitter: @wonderfrancis