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The Pedagogical Promises and Possibilities of Nature as Teacher

Abstract. This article extends Wergin's critique of transcultural and postcolonial scholarship, identifying in both a troublesome willingness to deagentify nature by interpolating people - often indigenous people - as its spokespeople, thus relegating nature to mere settings for human activity. Attention is given to examples of nature being allowed to teach, and to the pedagogical possibilities of learning from "living country." The article identifies several "tenets of transecological teaching" before concluding with four specific recommendations for teachers wishing to collaborate with nature-as-teacher and to invite nature to join their faculty.

Keywords. Experiential education, Indigenous wisdom, epistemology, nature as teacher, postcoloniality, sustainable development, transecology

Die pädagogischen Versprechen und Möglichkeiten der Natur als Lehrer

Zusammenfassung. Dieser Artikel erweitert Wergins Kritik an der transkulturellen und postkolonialen Wissenschaft, da er bei beiden eine problematische Bereitschaft feststellt, die Natur zu entmündigen, indem Menschen - oft indigene Völker - als ihre Sprecher eingesetzt werden, wodurch die Natur zu einem bloßen Schauplatz menschlicher Aktivitäten degradiert wird. Es wird auf Beispiele hingewiesen, in denen die Natur lehren kann, und auf die pädagogischen Möglichkeiten des Lernens vom „lebendigen Land". Der Artikel nennt mehrere „Grundsätze des transökologischen Unterrichts" und schließt mit vier spezifischen Empfehlungen für Lehrer:innen, die mit der Natur als Lehrerin zusammenarbeiten und die Natur in ihren Lehrkörper einladen wollen.

Schlüsselwörter. Erlebnispädagogik, indigene Weisheit, Erkenntnistheorie, Natur als Lehrerin, Postkolonialität, nachhaltige Entwicklung, Transökologie

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"And each of them torn from his native moorings, faced with the problems of disadjustment and readjustment, of deculturation and acculturation – in a word, of transculturation." (Ortiz 1995, p. 98)

1 Introduction

The transecological thinking proposed by Carsten Wergin in his contribution *From Transculture to Transecology. Coming to Terms with Multispecies Conviviality in the Education for Sustainable Development* seeks to overcome the dualism of transculturality arising from humans speaking for nature by providing an example of a pedagogical encounter in which learners leave the traditional classroom and their comfort zones so that nature can be heard, and can teach. In this article, I first consider transecology against a background of transcultural thinking to bring into relief the concept of nature as teacher. Subsequently, I consider the educational ramifications of learning from what the Goolarabooloo Wergin writes about call "living country." Finally, I conclude with a few thoughts on what teachers can do to let nature teach.

2 Nature Speaks

In 1940, Fernando Ortiz Fernández wrote about the influence of tobacco and sugar production on Cuban culture. As per the quote above, his writing delved into the adoption and deletion of cultures, and also their hybridization: "The result of every union of cultures is similar to that of the reproductive process between individuals: the offspring always has something of both parents but is always different from each of them" (ibid., p. 103).

The biological metaphor served to elucidate the point, honed by scholars over the decades that followed, that the meeting of cultures, be it via violent clash or copacetic dovetailing, inevitably produces a new epistemology, one that is not simply a sum of parts. As Welsch noted, "new forms of entanglement are a consequence of migratory processes, as well as of worldwide material and immaterial communication systems and economic interdependencies and dependencies" (1999, p. 68) and that "in meeting with other forms of life there are always not only divergences but opportunities to link up, and these can be developed and extended so that a common lifeform is fashioned which includes even reserves which hadn't earlier seemed capable of being linked in" (p. 72–73). The centrality of nature in transcultural thinking is evident in his use of terminology such as offspring, migration, and lifeform.

Both transcultural scholars speak directly to the sorts of processes – reproductive and migratory – that Wergin finds problematic in transcultural thinking, and which prompt him to consider the risk that such discourse might reify a false dichotomy between nature and culture. To this point, transcultural thinkers often do speak of nature, but even in the examples above, nature plays no role beyond serving as a setting for human activity – it is processes of human movement that determine the recombination of gametes, livelihoods, and more.

At this dis/juncture, which Wergin notes has been scrutinized by post-colonial scholars, he pushes for a shift from ego to eco, and questions our right to speak for nature. His move is reminiscent of Mignolo's for *border thinking*, which "engages the colonialism of Western epistemology from the perspective of epistemic forces that have been turned into subaltern (traditional, folkloric, religious, emotional, etc.) forms of knowledge" (2001, p. 11). But whereas Mignolo draws battle lines between ways of thinking, Wergin moves a bit beyond this, placing the borderline between people and culture, on one side, and nature on the other … and then removes the line completely, breaking down the nature/culture divide by noting that "people and culture are intrinsic to nature."

Whereas Wergin implies that decolonial thinking can offer an escape from the culture/nature dualism too often infecting transcultural thinking, in effect he moves also beyond the borderlines of post-colonial scholarship. For example, whereas Mignolo's statement above might suggest that university students from dominant cultures learn from indigenous teachers, in Wergin's example, both of these groups together learn from "living country" – the land itself.

This extension of the boundary follows naturally when looking back on the trajectory of postcolonial thinking. The assertion of Leff (2000) and Boff (2002) that logocentric thought has fueled the ecologically destructive practices of modernity is the basis for Escobar's (2007) claim that "modernity has failed to enable sustainable worlds" because projects of epistemic decolonization are too often "based on identifying an exclusive space of enunciation 'of one's own' that is blind to its own constructedness" (p. 197). In Escobar's estimation, Latin American political ecology efforts point us in the direction of sustainability:

> This ecology's ethical perspective on nature, life, and the planet entails the questioning of modernity and development, indeed an irrefutable indictment of the developmentalist fallacy. By privileging subaltern knowledges of the natural, this political ecology articulates in unique ways the questions of diversity, difference, and inter-culturality – with nature, of course, occupying a role as actor and agent. (Escobar, 2007, 198)

Wergin's critique can be aptly applied to this near-miss thinking in two ways. First, in considering the constructedness of spaces of exclusion, the purpose is enunciation, which presupposes a need for those who speak to exclude on the presumption of inability – as per the example of living country provided, the minds of modernity presuppose, or at least do not comprehend, that nature is capable of speaking. Second, and as an adjunct of the first critique, even when nature is bestowed by the post-colonial thinker with the ability to act agentively, subaltern knowledges of it are still interpolated as a go-between. The post-colonial focus on dominant epistemes leads to a privileging of the epistemes of the subaltern, but this "rescuing" effects to keep nature captured, quiet, distant. But nature is all around us – is us, as well.

This is not to imply that nature is equally accessible from subaltern and dominant positions, however. As apparent in Wergin's example, in which the professor's strategy is "never telling [the students] much in advance," realizing that nature is all around us and that we are nature is not as simple as being told this in a classroom. Escaping the Western episteme with the intellectual tools developed within that episteme is difficult if not impossible. Post-colonial scholars' focus on epistemic dominance is helpful, but their proposed remedy overprescribes subaltern epistemic thinking as guide, translator, and teacher. The assignment of all these roles to the subaltern leaves none for nature, and in this way makes clear an uncertainty, albeit slight, about the task at hand. As Welsch (1999) reminds us:

> According to Wittgenstein, culture is at hand whenever practices in life are shared. The basic task is not to be conceived of as an understanding of foreign cultures, but as an interaction with foreignness […] and there is always a good chance for such interactions, because there exist at least some entanglements, intersections, and transitions between the different ways of life. (p. 202–203)

Wittgenstein (cf. 1984) may not have been specifically centering nature, but he was clearly dispelling of the notion that the problem was merely one of cultures. Here again, the juxtaposition of transcultural and post-colonial thinking proves mutually beneficial.

Evident in the aforementioned examples is that much of transcultural thinking has, since its earliest iterations, assumed nature to encompass people and culture. However, many transcultural scholars have neutralized nature's role, ignoring it entirely or assigning it to mere setting. For example, although Ortiz (1995) included tobacco and sugar in the title of his book, he was not writing about the displacement of plants from their native soils – he was writing about the calam-

itous effects on local culture of colonial agriculture projects. Similarly, Welsch's (1999) focus on migratory processes as catalyst for creation leans heavily on sociologists' conceptions of movement throughout social worlds and identity realization (cf. Berger, Berger and Kellner 1973) and attachments and cross-cutting identities (cf. Bell 1980), but gives short shrift to nature as creator. Sharing Welsch's focus on movement, Juneja (2011) defines transculturality as a recognition of "forms of mobility and connectedness that have been characteristic of cultures over centuries" (p. 24) without recognizing nature even as terrain.

Wergin brings focus to this all too frequent de-emphasizing of nature in transcultural scholarship by drawing on the scrutiny of the decolonial shift. His efforts are effective because much of postcolonial scholarship, in focusing explicitly on borderlines between cultures, makes overtures to ecological and environmental concerns but subscribes subaltern bodies as intermediaries between modern man and nature. Without the benefit of such critical post-colonial scholarship, scholars in both fields fall into the trap of speaking on nature's behalf, interrupting the teaching occurring all around us in every moment. It is at this juncture Wergin's proposed transecology urges patience and offers compelling examples of how, if we listen, we can learn from "living country" – and about ourselves. It is to these examples we turn next.

3 The Pedagogical Possibilities of Learning from "Living Country"

Wergin provides two examples of transecological experiences motivating people to engage in preservative practices differently, with the second serving as an example for how nature can reconcile different worldviews. Both examples demonstrate how "stewardship supports transcultural justice and sustainable development beyond modernist constraints" and "the acknowledgment of our interdependence with the environment can activate within people a resilience against the pressing global challenges posed by unprecedented biodiversity loss and environmental degradation." By reading these examples closely, I identify key features of nature-as-teacher that can be used to evaluate or create additional pedagogical possibilities.

The first example is a hotel that recognizes and harmonizes with the environmental niche in which it was constructed, having been built so as not to require air conditioning for much of the year and in such a way as to allow guests to "hear the birds…the rustling of wind and the breeze in the trees. And you feel the breeze across your body …" The hotel manager also incorporated plants with

low water requirements that are more appropriate to the semi-arid climate due to "a sense of responsibility to a community and to a place."

The attention to sensation in this example is demonstrative of the fact that nature's teaching is not of the intellectual type typifying instruction in schools. Rather, nature's teaching can be accessed and enjoyed by utilizing the senses of the body with which we can learn. This learning fosters an ability to act as a steward of nature, which is a necessary step toward "a *care-full* consideration of the inter-relationship of people and land." Modernist projects that extract from the land without such "care-full" consideration of possible consequences, which prioritize short-term, quarterly profits over the long-term sustainability of our species, can be presumed thus to be mitigated by listening to nature, realizing our place in it, and learning to act as good stewards of the Earth – what we might call "tenets of transecological teaching."

The second example was of a nine-day walk by university students of landscape architecture along the Lurujarri Heritage Trail along the Indian Ocean coast following the song cycle of the Goolarabooloo. As noted above, the professor does not provide much information prior to departure, explaining that "it's an experience that is difficult to put into words." Typically, after the first few days some students complain that they are not learning anything, reflective of the fact that many students only recognize learning as the sort of activities they have previously experienced in school. This reifies the importance of one tenet of transcultural teaching - using one's senses to learn – and suggests that much of formal schooling today actively disables some students from learning from nature.

The professor's lack of instruction effectively removes himself as an obstacle to student learning, and positions students to learn from all that speaks but is all too often ignored. Nine days traversing "living country" allows students time to (re)engage their senses – of heat and their need for the shade provided by trees, or of red dirt and the cleansing power of streams and the ocean. The Goolarabooloo serve as guides and translate by way of story-telling but, as per the post-colonial interventions detailed in the previous section, they do not go as far as to teach. Like the professor, they allow students to engage directly with nature and, in doing so, allow nature to speak, and to teach. Wergin refers to what happens next as "learning through experience," pointing out that when conventional learning habits fail, students develop resilience and a creative energy stemming from living country. These can thus be considered outcomes of transecological teaching that will result from engagements with nature's teaching.

Using our senses to receive nature's teachings, recognizing ourselves as inter-connected with other natural systems, learning to serve as care-full custodians of what we too often disregard as setting, and drawing resilience and creative energy from our interactions with nature – this list seems only to enter the shallows of nature's teachings. And yet even this preliminary list serves as a cogent argument for including nature on our faculty, letting nature serve as our classrooms, and for letting nature change us instead of simply changing nature into textbooks about natural phenomena and the natural world. Wergin closes by citing severe biodiversity loss and environmental degradation as a cause for seeking new ways to engage with issues that "challenge ethical and pedagogical aspects of teaching," and rightfully so – by all accounts, our ways of teaching and learning have not proven capable of provoking behavioral change or averting the potential extinction of our and so many other species. We are currently experiencing a sixth mass extinction event, with little way of collective, sustained action to change our ways. With that having been said, I will close on a slightly more uplifting note, by considering practical steps teachers can take today to let nature teach.

4 Nature Teaches

While not all school-based learning is exclusive of nature as teacher, the post-colonial and transcultural theorists cited above heavily emphasize the importance of mobility and entanglement – both of which are difficult to achieve from within the confines of a classroom. While it is possible for teachers to bring nature into the classroom in the forms of recordings, specimen, or otherwise, this generally amounts to decontextualizing, or denaturing, nature. The learning that can be drawn from analyzing the composition of an oil pellet is a subset of the learning that can be done by finding an owl pellet on the forest floor. That which students can discover in analyzing pictures of environmental disasters is less likely to provoke long-term behavioral change than a field trip to clean up a local park or to plant trees around the school.

As such, teachers can help their student learn from nature by taking them out of the classroom. Sometimes referred to as outbound education or experiential education, enrolling students in conservation activities at city, state, and national parks and botanical gardens offers students time to engage their senses and learn to interact with their environments. As but one example, picking up trash involves olfactory and tactile learning, repurposing collected trash into art engages students' creative faculties, and organizing gallery exhibits for their collective collected creations empowers student voice, provides an opportunity

to realize their inter-connectedness with nature, and gain experience as stewards of the natural world.

In an effort to provide actionable practical steps to guide educators seeking to collaborate with nature in teaching, I offer four recommendations, all based on my analysis of Wergin's notion of transecological teaching:

1) *Get close to it*: Take students outside of the classroom to natural areas such as forests, beaches, mountains, and meadows. The natural areas within driving distance of the school more than suffice – this is the niche in which your students exist. Even better than public parks and other spaces frequently visited by people are natural spaces that are not manicured, curated, or often encountered by people. What can students find and what can they learn from the material items in the area?
2) *Find yourself in it*: Beyond the inferences that can be derived from objects, encourage students to smell, feel, hear, see and, where safely possible, taste. Which of these sensations have they experienced before, and which are new? What can they learn by experiencing the feelings and sensations that arise in their bodies in this natural setting?
3) *Take care of it*: Ask students to collect any trash they might find, and to observe the fauna for signs of damage from wind, rain, animals or otherwise. Instruct them to take note of any damage they encounter so that they can later research ways to help trees and plants recover from such damage. Remind them that in some instances, destruction is part of a life cycle that leads to regrowth, and that not all damage warrants intervention. How can they determine when to intervene or not? How have humans traditionally engaged with the animals found here, and what effect has such intervention had on the ecological balance of this area? What evidence can they gather to determine the health of the natural environment they are visiting?
4) *Let it take care of you*: Task students with documenting the types of flora and fauna present in the setting they are visiting for later identification, either via apps such as Seek, photography, drawings, or descriptions. What medicinal uses are ascribed to various plants in this setting? How are animals, including humans at higher levels of the trophic pyramid, interacting with, depending on, and being cared for by the plants here?

This article begins with a quote from a transcultural theorist which, read in the context of the previous pages, highlights how unnatural our conventional educational practices are, how they effect to denature us, and what additional learning is now requisite for our own survival. This article now ends by noting that nature stands ready to provide us with the resilience and creative energy we will need

to (re)engage our senses, find ourselves in the destruction we have caused, and assume roles of stewardship in our companies and communities. The pedagogical possibilities of centering nature as teacher extend beyond those identified in this article or that upon which it reflects, and future scholarship should seek to further explore this potential. But let us learn in the ways identified herein, and help others in our communities to do so at once, so that we may provoke behavioral change and begin in earnest to care for our environment and, in turn, be cared for by our resilient planet – our home, our playground, our classroom.

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