

An Ecofeminist Appeal to “Education *qua* Ecognosis”

Response to Schultz & Mullen

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If we take a moment now, I suspect that each one of us can remember a time when we felt the Earth was in a better state. It is easy to lament the degradation of the environment that we know, or what others before us have known, but there must be a point at last where these “dark times” propel us into action, and our next generations must see this need before it is too late. In moments when I feel we are too far gone, I think of the Hudson River.

In the 1970-1980s the mouth of the Hudson River near Manhattan was riddled with filth and grime. The water was unfit to dip a toe into, let alone support a generative freshwater ecosystem. Yet, one day not long ago a smooth dogfish shark was spotted in the Hudson, then a humpback whale. Years of policy reform and environmental efforts had paid off enough for large mammals and fish to once again be able to enter the former cesspool. It was amazing to behold the transformation. What would it take to do this on a global scale? What would students need from us to transform their world?

As our colleagues Ramsey Affifi, Sean Blenkinsop, Chloe Humphreys and Clarence W. Joldersma declare in their introduction to the 2017 special issue of *Studies in Philosophy of Education*, “Ecologizing Philosophy of Education,” the environmental stakes are so high that nothing short of a curricular transformation will do to prepare young people to live on a changed planet. “Ad hoc tinkering” to lessons are not enough to, say, keep the whales in the Hudson. To borrow pop-philosopher Timothy Morton’s words, the marvels that we remember (albeit the pastoral “Nature” that we wish for) have already been violated by *agrilogistics*.¹ It is for this very reason that my response to Annie Schultz and John Mullen’s engaging paper, “Education *qua* Ecognosis: Reading Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* for an Ecological Philosophy of Edu-

cation,” echoes the demands of Affifi et al. I appeal to Schultz and Mullen for an even more inclusive and profound curricular proposal, a curriculum that I believe Maxine Greene would argue updates the canon to include voices of feminist ecocriticism.

By reading Hardy with an ecological resolve, it indeed seems impossible to imagine anything but driving environmentalism behind his novels.² To support their argument for *Tess*, Schultz and Mullen include Maxine Greene’s book *The Public School and the Private Vision* in the conversation about the importance of literature—of aesthetics and art more generally really—to “provoke and invoke” us to rethink the world. This, I believe is the brilliance of their paper, to connect Greene’s wide-awakeness to Morton’s dark ecology, because they are able to demonstrate how we might still garner impact from something as seemingly subtle as a Romantic-era novel. Let us not underestimate art’s power to transform through imagination! So herein I will focus on what I suspect Greene might say about this project.

Greene noted in passing to our aesthetics of education class in fall 2012, in the last few years she lived, that she hoped still someday to complete the long-awaited rewrite of her book *The Public School and the Private Vision*, first published in 1965.³ Although there had been a new preface to the 2007 version, Greene still admitted often that she felt it was not enough. She called upon her classes and her teaching assistant, Daiyu Suzuki, to continuously supply her with books to read to “update her vision.” Greene frequently cited Dewey as saying that we must break “the crust of conventional consciousness,” a sentiment that aligns with Morton’s mission.⁴ In “Diversity and Inclusion: Toward a Curriculum for Human Beings,” Greene explains her growth since 1965 when speaking of others rebelling against objectification (which Morton’s object-oriented ontology circumvents):

This, of course, arouses me as a feminist, knowing how much there still is to clarify, how much there still is to resist. I am aware (how could I not be?) of the gaps in history and literature where women’s lives and ways of knowing are concerned. I know how much had to be hidden and repressed in my life and in lives like mine, if there was to be acceptance by a profession long governed by

masculinized and traditional norms. Quite obviously, this intensifies my desire to discover what can be meant by a truly inclusive society and a curriculum for human beings.⁵

She continues by saying that “imagination cannot be counted on to summon up visions of the romantic, the celestial, the harmonious,” which is correct for *ecognosis*, because the imagination arising from *Tess ought* to be a dark vision.⁶ However, Greene adds, “because I believe that encounters with the arts can awaken us to alternative possibilities of existing, of being human, of relating to others, of *being other*, that I argue for their centrality in curriculum.”⁷ In a way, we can say that *Tess* is that “other,” and *Tess* is intertwined with Nature, but do we get a clear enough vision of Nature as *being other* too? Greene names feminist scholar Elizabeth Minnich, who, “warns against making [women’s] scholarship merely additive to what has been recognized as knowledge, or simply mainstreaming it . . . she stresses the need to transform the curriculum,” because there is the “tendency of the dominant few . . . to define themselves not only as the inclusive kind of human but also as the norm and the ideal.”⁸ This reminds me again of Affifi et al.

P.L. Thomas identifies with Greene a trap where a text can covertly indoctrinate students into the system we seek to eradicate:

American literature is replete with works that explore the corrupting influences of many of the traditional forces associated with America; the irony, of course, is that these works are the core of the traditional American literature canon, speaking against the very system that schools tacitly support. Through these paradoxes, Greene recognizes that schools in the U.S. practice “the long tradition of socialization through schooling.” . . . In other words, ideal students in the traditional context can simultaneously explain the themes addressing the corrupted American Dream in Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925) while also filling their transcripts with all the right data in order to go to the best colleges . . . In a perverse cycle, *The Great Gatsby* serves as a conduit for students to enter the exact system

about which Fitzgerald sought to warn his readers, a system that very well may have brought about his own unhappiness and untimely death.⁹

If we seek to upturn the curriculum, *should* we support Hardy by choosing the most colonizing, bucolic English countryside to illustrate *agrilogistics*? Like Schultz, Mullen, Greene and Morton, I am fascinated by impressive literary prose, even the idea of residing in the “darkness” of the world, but where might this leave our students? Would this actually result in feelings toward *ecognosis* or just in a perpetuation of the same classical educations we have honored? Perhaps we must instead consider a curriculum that is modernly ecofeminist, or at the very least, non-anthropocentric.

In conclusion, we appear to be on the dirty Hudson in education. While Schultz and Mullen illustrate a beautiful way to share *ecognosis* with students, without a feminist ecocritical lens, it does not live up to the fervent demand of the day. It is for this reason that I have aligned my response with philosopher Maxine Greene, whom I believe, in her much later years, proposed an apt response to the curricular dilemma we face here: revise the canon to be more inclusive.

1 For some intriguing critiques of Morton’s dark ecology, particularly on similarities with early Donna Haraway and Carolyn Merchant, see Ariel Salleh, “The Anthropocene: Thinking in ‘Deep Geological Time’ or Deep Libidinal Time?,” *International Critical Thought* 6, no. 3 (2016): 422-33; Noel Castree, “Strange Ecology,” *new formations: a journal of culture/theory/politics* 75 (Spring 2012): 167-71; Ursula K. Heise, “Review of Timothy Morton’s *Hyperobjects*,” *Critical Inquiry* 41, no. 2 (2015): 460-61.

2 See Morton’s ideas of sustainability in Hardy in A.G. Tait, “Sustainability, ‘Collectivity’ and Thomas Hardy’s Vision of All Life,” *Green Letters* 19, no. 1 (2015): 50-62.

3 Greene’s awakening to feminism is confirmed by other former students’

accounts. Nancy Lesko, "Feeling the Teacher: A Phenomenological Perspective on Maxine Greene's Pedagogy," in *The Passionate Mind of Maxine Greene: 'I Am... Not Yet,'* ed. William F. Pinar (London: Falmer Press, 1998), 238. For a similar account see William F. Pinar, "Notes on the Intellectual: In Praise of Maxine Greene," in *A Light in Dark Times: Maxine Greene and the Unfinished Conversation*, ed. William Ayers (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997), 120.

4 Maxine Greene, "Diversity and Inclusion: Toward a Curriculum for Human Beings," *Teachers College Record* 95, no. 2 (Winter 1993): 211.

5 Greene, "Diversity and Inclusion," 213-14.

6 Greene, 214.

7 Greene, 214.

8 Greene, 215.

9 P. L. Thomas, "Of Rocks and Hard Places—The Challenge of Maxine Greene's Mystification in

Teacher Education," *Journal of Educational Controversy* 5, no. 1 (2010): 2, Article 10.