Breaking New Ground in Ecocomposition: An Introduction

Christian R. Weisser
University of Hawaii (Hilo)
Hilo, Hawaii

Sidney I. Dobrin
University of Florida
Gainesville, Florida

All thinking worthy of the name must now be ecological.
—Lewis Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine*

Recently, scholarship, research, and knowledge-making in composition studies began to redefine the discipline's boundaries in order to provide more contextual, holistic, and useful ways of examining the world of discourse. At the same time, one of the slowly developing, though crucial, trends in American universities has been toward the integration of ecological and environmental studies in academic disciplines across the spectrum. While theoretical and pedagogical studies in disciplines throughout academia have made significant inroads toward linking knowledge between the sciences and humanities, composition and rhetoric's inclusion of the "hard sciences" in its interdisciplinary agenda has been limited for the most part to cognitive psychology. True, some of the most influential and important works in composition have drawn upon works in history, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, literary criticism, and other areas of study within the humanities, but only recently have compositionists begun to significantly inquire into scientific scholarship to inform work in their own discipline. *Ecocomposition: Theoretical and Pedagogical Approaches* seeks to explore the connections between interdisciplinary inquiries of composition research and ecological studies and forwards the potential for theoretical and pedagogical work in ecocomposition. That is, this collection examines composition studies through an ecological lens to bring to the classroom, to scholarship, and to larger public audiences a critical position through which to engage the world.

Ecocomposition: Theoretical and Pedagogical Approaches examines current trends in universities toward more environmentally sound work,

explores the intersections between composition research—that is, discourse studies—and ecostudies, and offers possible pedagogies for the composition classroom. As the essays in this collection demonstrate, the intersections between ecotheory and composition studies in theory and pedagogy have never before been addressed in a scholarly collection in depth or in detail. This volume brings together a diverse array of prominent voices to discuss ecocomposition.

Though it may be our urge in this introduction to provide a concrete definition of *ecocomposition,* we are going to resist doing so to some degree, since the eighteen essays gathered in this collection stand as that very definition. Or, to be more accurate, they stand as the initiation of that definition; that is, we hope that these essays contribute to a larger conversation about ecocomposition. Having said that however, let us offer the premise that ecocomposition is an area of study which, at its core, places ecological thinking and composition in dialogue with one another in order to both consider the ecological properties of written discourse and the ways in which ecologies, environments, locations, places, and natures are discursively affected. That is to say, ecocomposition is about relationships; it is about the coconstitutive existence of writing and environment; it is about physical environment and constructed environment; it is about the production of written discourse and the relationship of that discourse to the places it encounters.

It seems to us that in a collection about ecocomposition, the locations from which these contributions emerge are inseparable from the very ideas that they report. These essays come from a diverse array of locations, both theoretical and physical, and these perspectives provide a variety of approaches to understanding and practicing ecocomposition. In the spirit of biodiversity, hearing from a range of scholars from a range of places is crucial to ecocomposition scholarship. Ecocomposition must be a bio-diverse discipline. The essays in this collection move toward such a diversity.

In the opening essay of the collection, "Writing Takes Place," Sid contends that composition is an ecological pursuit. He provides an initial definition of ecocomposition in light of traditional definitions of ecology and claims that ecocomposition "is the investigation of the total relations of discourse both to its organic and inorganic environment and the study of all of the complex interrelationships between the human activity of writing and all of the conditions of the struggle for existence." He then provides a rationale for why ecocomposition is critical to composition studies and extends the notion that composition is already ecological and "that writing and rhetoric cannot be separated from place, from environment, from nature, from location."

Providing more initial definitions, Derek Owens examines the concept of sustainability. He writes, "I hope it will suffice to equate sustainability with living more simply, buying less stuff, conserving and preserving limited resources, and resisting the addictions fostered within our current consumer culture." This, and his more detailed definitions are necessary as Owens claims that "Such definitions present a holistic interpretation of sustainability useful to educators who agree that we've a responsibility to invent a locally based, pedagogical ethic informed and inspired by an awareness of the need to think and act sustainably." He writes that "Given composition's access to incoming college students and its cross-disciplinary makeup, few fields might play as important a role as composition could in promoting a sustainable ethic. Those of us who teach composition and design writing programs have perhaps more responsibility than other faculty to promote sustainable thinking throughout the curriculum."

M. Jimmie Killingsworth, whose work in environmental rhetoric stands as fundamental to the evolution of ecocomposition, collaborates with John Krajicek in "Ecology, Alienation, and Literacy: Constraints and Possibilities in Ecocomposition." The authors begin by exploring some of the rhetorical stances that environmental writers might assume, and they examine the tradition in American nature writing toward alienated, individualistic perspectives as an example of the connectedness and disconnectedness that written discourse offers. Through an interesting narrative of their lives as writing teachers, both inside and outside of the classroom, Killingsworth and Krajicek make the point that writing—particularly that which locates itself within the natural world—often involves both alienation and communion. They write, "Like literacy, environmentalism could not be sustained without both alienated individuals and mass identification, indeed without a degree of alienation and identification within each individual." The movement from solitude to society and back again, they argue, "is the very motion of literacy."

Like Killingsworth and Krajicek's contribution, many of the essays in this collection focus on thinking and writing about "Natural" places; however, Julie Drew's essay focuses on the primary "place" of writing instruction—the composition classroom. She argues that compositionists might reimagine students as travelers, and by extension, we might construct a "politics of place that is more likely to include students in the academic work of composition, and less likely to continue to identify and manage students as discursive novices." Drew's innovative approach seeks to engage students in a form of discursive map-making, in which students become more responsible for identifying the various locations they inhabit,

the power relations indicated by language use that reside in those locations, and the discursive conventions familiar to insiders. Drew argues that rather than envisioning students as novices in the environment of academic discourse, they might more accurately be viewed "as travelers who, to varying degrees, have arrived in a place where power relations are obscured, the discourse is unfamiliar, and the conventions are as yet unmastered."

Like Drew's notion of inhabiting discursive locations, Anis Bawarshi suggests an ecological conception of genres, arguing that they are the sites in which communicants reproduce both the habits and habitats of discourse. In other words, he contends that writers use language to construct rhetorical environments or situations in which they exist, interact with one another, and enact social actions. Bawarshi states that "genres are the rhetorical ecosystems that allow communicants to enact and reproduce various situations, social practices, relations, and identities." To emphasize the ecological nature of genres, he examines several sites of discourse—most notably, a physician's office—and highlights the ways in which this genre-constituted habitat shapes and mediates the discursive relationships therein. Bawarshi rightly urges compositionists to pay more attention to the rhetorical ecosystems within which communication and communicators take place and are made possible.

Following Drew's and Bawarshi's initial exploration of discursive sites, Christian's essay suggests that composition's conceptions of identity do not account for the degree to which various ecosystems and their inhabitants affect the discourse that individual human beings produce. He begins by tracing the recent history of composition theory to show how it has expanded to account for a greater number of influences on a writer's identity, and he goes on to argue that our conceptions of identity will remain *pre-ecological* until we begin to account for the "degree to which we orient ourselves to nonhuman others as well as to human reference groups." This move toward a more expansive conception of identity, Christian posits, allows us to envision writers and their discourse as "socially constructed and sustained in community with an enormous number of interconnected others along with their ecologies and habitats." He rightly urges us as compositionists to expand our field, and our field of vision, to include the nonhuman world in our investigations of the production of discourse and identity.

Randall Roorda, whose work in ecological literacy and nature writing has been crucial to the development of ecocomposition, begins his essay, "Great Divides: Rhetorics of Literacy and Orality," by noting the parallel development between composition and literacy studies and the "great

divide" between perceptions of literacy and orality. He explores the various camps of thought regarding literacy and sketches "grounds upon which these disparate camps might agree to disagree, cognizant of points of departure in premises and argumentative procedures." Roorda couches this discussion in "claims made about literacy by environmentally oriented commentators" and indicates " respects in which those claims might be found wanting from the standpoint of many literacy professionals." Rhetorics of literacy and orality, Roorda contends, "can serve as instruments for thinking about instrumentation in thinking—one element in a more generalized critique of technology and culture from which educators cannot be excepted."

Stephen G. Brown, then, offers the Alaskan environment as "a master trope not only for indigenous identity, but for native resistance as well—resistance to neocolonial imperialism in general, and to its particular manifestation in borderland signifying practices." Brown explores the "tension between signification and a native landscape, between the colonizer's tendency to take possession through naming and the Alaskan environment's ability to elude linguistic containment" and develops "the implications of foregrounding the environment as a category of critical inquiry in Composition Studies," a category he sees as significant as the "categories of race, class, and gender that have driven so much of the discourse in the field." Brown's inquiry develops "the usefulness of the environment as a topos of inquiry for actualizing the second, and oft-neglected aspect of Freirean praxis: for translating academic analysis of oppression in its various guises into meaningful social action" and analyzes "the manner in which signification functions as a vehicle of cultural domination, deploying as an analytical tool a postcolonial reading of representation in the borderlands across a spectrum of texts."

Mark C. Long begins his essay "Education and Environmental Literacy: Reflections on Teaching Ecocomposition in Keene State College's Environmental House" with the claim that "With academic writing and critical thinking understood as a function of cultural literacy, theorists and practitioners of writing have advocated the study of cultural production, introducing students to the ideological and material forces that reflect and shape their lives. Inviting students to draw upon their personal experiences with these cultural forces, and to sharpen their skills at identifying and interpreting cultural signs, composition theorists have definitively resituated the creative acts of reading, thinking, and writing in the ever-expanding domain of political and cultural practices." Like Brown's turn to Freirean praxis, Long goes on to explain that ecocomposition has defined itself with a goal similar to Paulo Freire's "critical consciousness" and to the latter's

understanding of literacy in mind. Long posits that for ecocomposition "the ambitious goal of linking academic and ecological literacy hinges, in part, on redefining the term *literacy* and then using it to address the local and global dimensions of environment problems." Long offers the theory that "the shift in emphasis from cultural to ecological literacy generates a space for the conceptual category of the environment in the composition course." He then describes two types of ecocompositions that push toward the agendas of literacy he sees as critical to ecocomposition.

Like Brown and Long, Arlene Plevin sees ecocomposition as a means through which more liberating pedagogies can be theorized and practiced. She argues that the complexity of theorizing place as a critical category as important as race, class, gender, or culture "reinvigorates composition studies by offering the additional potential for political engagement—environmental activism—a kind of activism that can be, as Freire writes in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* 'not pseudo-participation, but committed involvement.'" Plevin grounds her position in both Freire's work and in the writing that her own students have produced.

Greta Gaard—one of the most influential ecofeminist scholars—explores the close relationships between the important new work in ecocomposition and its indebtedness to research and activism in ecofeminism. Gaard correctly suggests that "ecocomposition and ecofeminism share many features of both process and perspective, and that ecocomposition offers a new and valuable approach to teaching not only writing but environmental ethics and social justice as well." Through her exploration of the theoretical and pedagogical intersections between ecofeminism and ecocomposition, Gaard posits that composition courses organized around these intersections have the potential to "encourage a healthy diversity of environmentalisms in the classroom and to teach students an appreciation for diversity that can prepare educated citizens to shape and participate in a multicultural, democratic, and ecological society."

Similarly, Colleen Connolly's essay explores the notion of diversity—an important topic of discussion in composition studies—through the lens of feminism. She suggests that compositionists consider a writing curriculum that "examines how our relationship to the natural world, like our relationship to each other and to the social world, is based on the values, discourses, and institutional practices that shape and maintain our realities." Interestingly, Connolly's essay offers an ecofeminist pedagogy that aims to examine and think about the discursive and cultural practices that define the relations among individuals, society, and nature—providing students with opportunities to write environmentally conscious essays.

Christopher J. Keller's "The Ecology of Writerly Voice: Authorship, Ethos, and Persona," theorizes as to why African-American students in a composition course engage nature writing differently than their white classmates. Keller's essay considers an assignment made to two sections of a composition course that provided as an option for an assignment to have students "retreat" to a natural setting and to write about that experience. Keller writes that "my intention is never to force students to visit natural places that may evoke discomfort or fear (students always have an option *not* to write the retreat narrative), but personally and pedagogically I hoped and still hope that through their writing students come to *experience, engage,* and *feel* more intimately the larger ecological web of life, in addition to becoming more aware of the current destruction and devastation of the natural world." What Keller found, however, upon receiving the final written assignments was that none of his African-American students chose the retreat option. His essay asks; "Why had most of the white students in my courses decided to write narratives of retreat while *all* the African-American students chose the assignment that let them stay away from nature and write instead about contemporary politics and issues of the environment?"

One key component of ecocomposition, as we have noted, is that it extends the boundaries of the classroom. That is, ecocomposition must include a component of activism and participation that moves beyond the classroom space. In her contribution, Annie Merrill Ingram discusses service learning as a critical facet of ecocomposition, and visa versa. She suggests that incorporating service learning into environmental writing courses is one way to extend ecocomposition, since a "service learning component benefits not only students and teacher—in terms of greater motivation, productivity, and investment in the course—but also the wider community, while broadening the scope and contribution of the class in real, tangible ways." Ingram's essay juxtaposes some insightful theoretical and pedagogical investigations of service learning in ecocomposition with an interesting narrative of one particular activity (a volunteer cleanup of a nature preserve) she used in a first-year writing course.

Like Ingram, Paul Linholdt urges us to approach ecocomposition as a form of civic participation, what he calls "applied composition," in order to make our work more meaningful and consequential. He argues that we should refigure composition in ways that "validate personal experience in our own work and in our classrooms" in order to move toward praxis and away from abstract theorizing. Linholdt suggests that to gain "greater consequentiality, the principles of rhetoric and composition need to be applied," and ecocomposition is an important arena in which this application can occur.

In "Written In Its Own Season: Nature as Ground in the Postmodern World," Edward Lotto posits that "the postmodern world seems to delight in pulling the rug out from under us, in calling into question any ground we might try to stand on." He argues that the concept of nature can serve as the kind of nonfoundational authority that postmodern theorists such as Lester Faigley and Patricia Bizzell claim are needed in order to develop a national public discourse. Lotto claims that a careful use of nature "can indeed work as a ground for thought and action both in the classroom and in the world. It can serve as a powerful authority in a world that has at least the glimmerings of an ecological ethic, and it can be used in a nonfoundational way if we use if properly."

David Thomas Sumner's essay, "Don't Forget to Argue: Problems, Possibilities, and Ecocomposition," begins with a critique of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment's (ASLE) on-line publication of syllabi for courses that address environmental/ecological subject matter in English classrooms. Sumner was invited to assist with the portion of the publication that addressed composition classes in particular. Sumner's essay questions the ways in which composition is incorporated into these classes. He writes that "after editing these syllabi, it became clear to me that before embarking on a project we call "ecocomposition," we first need to discuss, argue about, and explore what we mean when we use the term *composition* and the role we see composition playing at the university." Sumner's experiences with the ASLE syllabi "makes it clear that as we begin to define the field of ecocomposition, we need to not only emphasize our commitment to the more-than-human world, but, if we expect to be taken seriously, we also need to be aware of how that commitment fits into contemporary rhetoric and composition theory and practice."

Finally, Bradley John Monsma examines the relationships between a number of environments—including the composition course, the campus, and the World Wide Web—and explores the problems and possibilities of incorporating these seemingly diverse spaces. His essay explains how he "put a whole class to work at compiling a natural history of our campus in a pursuit of wisdom appropriate to our place on the border between the Verdugo Hills and urban Los Angeles." Monsma suggest that while assignments done in webbed environments certainly do not insure that students will become better writers or more ecologically conscious, it might "encourage writers to respond more readily to other writing and to changes in the world."

What we hope readers will glean from this diverse collection of articles is the array of possibilities that ecocomposition holds for composition

studies. However, we do also want to be cautious in offering this want from this collection that ecocomposition not become a master narrative that proselytizes ecological thinking as somehow better or more important thinking. During State University of New York Press' initial review of this collection, one reviewer noted concern that the essays gathered here failed to pay critical attention to the overriding positions that ecological thinking, activist pedagogies, and benevolent teaching of ecological discourses strive for a position of totalizing narrative. The reviewer wrote, "The activist pedagogy seems a given here, established without the kind of inquiry directed at every other aspect of the classroom dynamic: students (Brown, Long, and Lotto), texts (Roorda and Keller), genres (Bawarshi), even the classroom itself (Drew)." We are grateful to this reviewer for leveling this important critique. It is essential that any of us working in ecocomposition studies (or any field for that matter) be willing to problematize and self-reflexively critique these initial explorations into ecocomposition. The reviewer notes that ecocomposition must be willing to consider "counter-hegemonic" arguments within ecocomposition and notes specifically Long and also Sumner's contributions as moving in such directions. Sumner, for instance, exemplifies this sort of maneuver when he writes, "we do not do justice to our role as teachers if our composition classroom turns into a cheering section for pet causes, environmental or other. Such a class may generate converts, or even enemies, but it will not provide students with the necessary critical writing and thinking skills to address the complexity of issues they will face at the academy and in life." While we don't think that our enthusiasm—and the enthusiasm of the authors gathered here—should be abandoned, we certainly agree that ecocomposition must remain self-aware and open to critique. Perhaps the continual influence of ideas, insights, and epistemologies from other disciplines—an integral aspect of ecocomposition—will help to avoid close-minded thinking or proselytizing.

As we have mentioned, this is a book about relationships and communities; the authors who have contributed to this collection hope to promote the idea that the relationships between words, thoughts, communities, and locations are significant and worthy of study by scholars and teachers of writing. In a way, this book can be seen as a small ecosystem of ideas about this very subject, a conversation that occupies a place within the larger region of composition studies, which is situated within the larger ecospheres of English studies, academia, and the Earth, respectively. This book intends to make these locations more obvious while at the same time venturing into new disciplinary, epistemological, theoretical, and pedagogical territories.