

CHAPTER I

Ecocomposition



*Life must become more than
the wants and needs of humans.
We are not on this earth alone.
If the manatee goes into extinction
because the needs of humans
became more important
then we will have taken another
step backward toward our own
demise. Extinction is forever
and for all.*

—Dr. Harvey Barnett

We begin this book with these words not for what they say—though their message is important—but because of where one must go to read them in the original: 22 feet below the surface of Crystal River in Florida, where endangered manatees spend the winter. These words appear in a place where words might seem a foreign thing, an intrusive thing in a natural place.¹ Yet, when we dive at Crystal River, as we often have, the words remind us of how enmeshed the world of words, of text, and the natural world are. They are a reminder that human hands have mapped and defined “natural” places and that no matter how lost in the wild one tries to get, the natural environment is a world constructed and defined by human discourse. Even in the most remote portions of the Everglades—the quintessentially unique natural Florida environment—does one find written text warning of contaminated water, of human intrusion in wild places. Even the very boundaries of the Everglades are mapped and legislated through text; where nature may exist is discursively regulated. The very act

of naming a place “Everglades” distinguishes what is and what is not of that environment.

Such examples are by no means limited to Florida. Half a world away on the “Big Island” of Hawaii, words demarcate where natural sites exist. Each year, thousands of tourists flock to Hawaii Volcanoes National Park to get a glimpse at a “real” volcano. Most of them stop at the small town just outside the park, aptly named “Volcano,” to purchase T-shirts, coffee mugs, and postcards emblazoned with images of Mauna Loa or Kilauea. Little attention is paid to the fact that it is *all volcano*, that the Hawaiian Islands themselves are volcanic peaks formed over the course of millions of years. In fact, this mapping and classifying of environments extends even below the depths of the world’s oceans, encompassing sites as yet inaccessible to human beings. Fifteen miles south of Hawaii, more than three thousand feet below sea level, lies the volcanic seamount *Loihi*. Despite the fact that it will not reach sea level for tens of thousands of years, tour guides, residents, and even some scientists have begun referring to *Loihi* as the *next* Hawaiian island, thereby mapping and inscribing a long political, cultural, and social history upon this island that is yet to be.

Relationships between text and nature are impossible to avoid. In fact, postmodernity has come to identify nature as text, despite the fact that humans often ascribe anthropomorphic languages to that text rather than listening to or reading nature’s own text. It is our goal to explore the relationships between discourse and natural systems, between language and environment, and between writing and ecology. For just as we spend much of our recreational time under or on the water or rambling in natural places, our professional time is spent examining discourse and teaching composition. And though, at first, the worlds of environmental and ecological thinking and composition scholarship and pedagogy might seem only remotely related, it is our agenda to show that not only are environment and composition closely bound to one another, but that the work of composition studies is an ecological endeavor. We wish to show that eco-composition is a critical part of our scholarly inquiry in composition studies. We agree with Kenneth Burke (1965) who argues that intellectual life cannot be removed from “life,” from biological, natural existence.

Environmental issues have become predominant in political and scholarly conversations in the late 1990s and early 2000s. American universities have begun granting degrees in Ecology, Wildlife Management, and Environmental Engineering as well as many other environmentally and ecologically based areas of study. However, until very recently, most academic endeavors regarding environmental and/or ecological concerns have been addressed primarily in the “hard sciences.” In fact, composition, and much

of the rest of the humanities has been resistant to scientific inquiry (we will discuss this resistance later). In the latter half of the 1990s, research, scholarship, and knowledge-making in academia began to redefine and extend disciplinary boundaries in order to provide more contextual, holistic, and useful ways of examining the world. Likewise, scholars have begun to inquire as to how environmental issues impact art, literature, discourse, and other areas of interest to scholars in the humanities. Yet, composition and rhetoric's inclusion of the "hard sciences" in its interdisciplinary agenda has been limited for the most part to cognitive psychology. There has been, as we have said, a resistance to the methodologies employed by the sciences. And while certainly composition studies and postmodern humanities studies need to question scientific method and inquiry—as do postmodern scientists Sandra Harding, Donna Haraway, and others—ecocomposition also identifies a need to turn to ecological methodologies in our study of written discourse. While neither of us claim to be scientists, or even experts in the ecological, environmental, or natural sciences, we do identify that what these scientific inquiries provide can be of great use to composition studies.

A new orientation toward ecological notions of composition—conceptually, methodologically, metaphorically, and pedagogically—promises to be an exciting and potentially meaningful direction for the field of composition studies. Like many of the other important movements in writing instruction over the past forty years, the move toward ecocomposition stands to develop more sophistication and complexity by incorporating research, theories, and scholarship in other academic disciplines. Just as cognitivist approaches to composition were influenced by inquiries into psychology, social constructionist perspectives were influenced by work in philosophy and the social sciences, and more recent post-process investigations have been influenced by cultural studies, social theory, feminism, and postcolonial studies, we feel that composition can also benefit from work in ecology and environmental sciences. In other words, it is only *natural* that composition studies recognizes its affiliation with ecological and environmental disciplines, and it stands to reason that our understandings of *discourse* can only become more precise and sophisticated through investigations that recognize the importance of these studies.

Composition studies is certainly not unique in its desire to turn to interdisciplinary investigations in order to extend and elaborate its understandings of a subject. Granted, most scholarship in the two fundamental academic domains, commonly called the "humanities" and the "sciences," still has a look of permanence to it. At times, the gaps between these two domains, and often even between disciplines that fall within the same domain, seem insurmountable. The various disciplines have their own languages,

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codes, theories, and jargonistic terms, and as a result, they are often unable or unwilling to communicate with one another. Ecomposition hopes to bridge this gap between domains by recognizing that the specialization of composition studies—discourse—is inextricably linked to at least one specialization in the hard sciences—ecology. Perhaps one of the most significant goals of ecomposition is its desire to cross the boundaries between the two academic cultures of the humanities and the sciences, and, in the process, make the connections between the various tongues of each. “This polarization [between the humanities and the sciences] is sheer loss to us all,” wrote C. P. Snow in his defining 1959 essay *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*. “To us as a people, and to our society. It is at the same time practical and intellectual and creative loss.” To use a spatial metaphor, ecomposition considers the crossing of distances between the sciences and the humanities to be of utmost importance. As the well-known biologist Edward O. Wilson writes in *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*,

There is only one way to unite the great branches of learning and end the culture wars. It is to view the boundary between the scientific and literary cultures not as a territorial line but as a broad and mostly unexplored terrain awaiting cooperative entry from both sides. The misunderstandings arise from ignorance of the terrain, not from a fundamental difference in mentality. (137)

Ecomposition explores this terrain in an effort to formulate better understandings of discourse and its relationship to the world we live in. However, we’d like to avoid the conquestatory and acquisitive metaphors that Wilson seems to suggest, since these metaphors reflect a mindset that is at the root of the current ecological crisis. As we will show later in detail, the discursive construction of the natural world has been (at least since the Enlightenment) used to justify its exploitation. We prefer to view the role of ecompositionists as intellectual travelers who explore new territories in an effort to change themselves, taking nothing but experiences and knowledge, preserving the integrity and resources of the space traveled in for others to experience and learn from. Ecompositionists delve into ecological and environmental studies not to extend our territory in the intellectual landscape, but to improve our understanding of the connections between these related disciplines, discourses, and epistemologies.

In the last twenty-five years, theorists and researchers in the social sciences and humanities have embraced the systematic exploration of social relations and culture as integral to the study of the construction of knowledge (epistemology). Likewise in composition studies, the social dimensions of

language have dominated scholarly conversations concerning the construction of knowledge. That is, in the 1980s, many composition theorists and researchers began to focus on the social nature of writing and suggested that the correlation between social experience and writing ability is palpable. This orientation had widespread implications for composition theory, and brought with it, for example, new ways of thinking about an individual's identity (very often, the student in a writing class) and how identity is manifested through writing and speaking. As Christian has suggested in his essay "Ecocomposition and the Greening of Identity," social constructionist approaches to composition "expanded the way we thought of identity, asserting that it emerges not just from the internal processes of the individual, but also from a wider variety of influences: the social conventions we share with other human beings" (83–84). Within the past decade, compositionists have focused much of their attention post-process toward the critical categories of race, gender, class, and culture. These beneficial inquiries have aided in continuously redefining ways in which language impacts human thought and identity. Within just the past few years, some compositionists have begun to include place and environment as other critical categories in this very inquiry. All of the essays in the collection we recently edited, *Ecocomposition: Theoretical and Pedagogical Perspectives* (2000), recognize the importance of ecological approaches to composition. This recognition is long overdue, and the inclusion of ecological and/or environmental perspectives in composition theory is essential to the discipline's continued growth and development. As Cheryll Glotfelty explains, "If your knowledge of the outside world were limited to what you could infer from the major publications of the literary profession, you would quickly discern that race, class, and gender were the hot topics of the late twentieth century, but you would never suspect that the earth's life support systems were under stress. Indeed, you might never know that there was an earth at all" (xvi). Though leveled as a critique of literary criticism, the same critique applies to composition studies. A perusal of the major journals and publications in composition studies of the last decade reveal composition's turn toward issues of cultural studies, post-process writing, and various other socially based issues of discourse. Yet, with very limited exceptions in the last few years of the 1990s, compositionists have been wary of addressing issues of ecology, environment, place, location, and habitat in their scholarship. More recently, however, composition-specific publications such as *JAC: A Journal of Composition Theory, Composition Studies, and College Composition and Communication* have begun to print a very limited number of environment-directed articles that specifically address the intersections between composition and environmental concerns. We hope to promote

and advance the importance of examining the intersections between discourse, place, and environment through theoretical examinations and pedagogical approaches and to explain how and why composition's roots do indeed tap into ecological sciences in their current incarnations. We hope to show how the two massive cultural projects of composition studies and ecology might inform one another and to identify how composition studies is very much an ecological inquiry. That is, we offer here a call to composition to embrace the work being done in ecocomposition.

At this point, it is important to establish a working definition of exactly what (we feel) ecocomposition comprises. We provide this definition as a conceptual framework, a ground in which more fruitful, complex studies might emerge. We do not intend to offer here in this rudimentary definition, or anywhere else in this book, a final definition that excludes other interpretations. We hope only to provide a point of origin for others who wish to travel similar terrain. We would also like to establish that in this book, when we say things like "ecocomposition is" or "ecocomposition contends," we do so working from our current conceptions of the subject, which result from a still rudimentary phase in ecocomposition's development. We are certain that ecocomposition will flourish in productive and worthwhile directions, and we hope only that this study will facilitate this evolution. That being said, we offer the following definition of ecocomposition:

Ecocomposition is the study of the relationships between environments (and by that we mean natural, constructed, and even imagined places) and discourse (speaking, writing, and thinking). Ecocomposition draws primarily from disciplines that study discourse (chiefly composition, but also including literary studies, communication, cultural studies, linguistics, and philosophy) and merges the perspectives of them with work in disciplines that examine environment (these include ecology, environmental studies, sociobiology, and other "hard" sciences). As a result, ecocomposition attempts to provide a more holistic, encompassing framework for studies of the relationship between discourse and environment.

In the pages that follow, we offer further working definitions of various terms and theories pertinent to the evolution of *ecocomposition*. We explore the history of environmental, ecological, conservationist, and preservationist writing and their recent emergences in the humanities and the sciences, tracing the history of the discussions surrounding them in order to establish a theoretical rationale for ecocomposition. We explore the liberatory, activist potentials of environmental and ecological discourse,

and we develop pedagogical approaches for the ecocomposition classroom. Within this inquiry, we also hope to provide perspectives as to why environmental studies are crucial to our work as compositionists and our lives as human beings and to highlight ways in which contemporary composition studies is already ecological.

Beginning Places

We begin here by establishing the context of *ecocomposition*. We have heard the word used loosely in several instances over the past few years, though we have seen no attempt at defining the agendas of this scholarly inquiry. In their 1998 panel at the Conference on College Composition and Communication Convention in Chicago, Randall Roorda, Lee Smith, and Michael McDowell began to introduce *ecocomposition* to the composition population. None offered any formal definition for the term *ecocomposition* as such. Roorda's introductory remarks can be seen as landmark in the evolution of ecocomposition as he called for the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment to redirect their focus from "Literature" to "Literacy." In this call, Roorda offered a definition of "ecological literacy" based on David W. Orr's definition of the same term. Roorda linked ecological literacy with the process orientation in composition to introduce a "process-oriented aspect of literacy and environmental education" to composition studies. Roorda then moved to establish the ASLE-CCCC Special Interest Group which met for the first time the following year at CCCC in Atlanta. We are grateful for Roorda's effort to create a site for ecocomposition in CCCC, yet at no time did Roorda's introductory remarks and actions move toward defining ecocomposition as a school of thought, inquiry, or critical approach which could be situated in composition studies.

For Lee Smith, the assumption was that ecocomposition was a term of familiarity and her focus turned to how ecocomposition and service learning might interact in a classroom. Her talk highlighted an interesting course design which linked "ecocomposition and service learning" in order to "provide opportunities for students to arrive at [environmental] awareness and engage in real world research and writing." Certainly, service learning and real world writing assignments are a part of ecocomposition, and Smith's talk helped promote thinking about how ecocomposition pedagogies might evolve, but it lacked the definitions we sought for ecocomposition. Similarly, Michael McDowell provided a wonderful discussion of how the spaces of computer-assisted classrooms can be examined as ecological spaces. McDowell argued that "Ecomomp terminology and ideas

not only help explain what happens as our students write, but ecocomp also offers a necessary antidote to some of the usually ignored negative effects of using computers in composition classes.” Yet, like Smith, McDowell leaves “ecocomp” undefined and assumed in his CCCC talk.

In his essay “Talking about Trees in Stumptown: Pedagogical Problems in Teaching EcoComp,” McDowell also provides a substantial and important discussion of developing ecocomposition pedagogies. He correctly claims that “environmental issues make ideal subjects for composition classes because they are as complex, as multidisciplinary, and as emotionally charged as any social issues can be: they are based upon cultural assumptions that are currently changing; every student has direct personal experience with them; and many environmental issues engage every sense we have” (19). McDowell then describes the types of problems that may arise in an ecocomposition course and goes on to provide helpful solutions to some of these problems. McDowell also assesses the various textbooks designed for an ecocomposition classroom, and then discusses ways in which local issues may be brought into the ecocomposition class. It is only then that McDowell provides any definition of ecocomposition.

Although now I only recommend a daily newspaper, the inclusion of daily environmental news into the class has expanded the definition of EcoComp to embrace almost every subject a student can think of. Whereas initially I thought of these courses as focusing on the natural world, now they focus on the environmental aspect of any significant issue, the closer to home the better. (22)

While we certainly agree with McDowell’s initiative to involve local texts and to encourage the exploration of environmental aspects of any event, we also acknowledge the limited and limiting view of ecocomposition which this definition provides. First, and foremost, we want to identify that ecocomposition—both an inquiry and a pedagogy—does not simply focus on the natural world. As we suggested in our introductory definition, ecocomposition examines all sorts of spaces, including natural, urban, constructed, political, personal, virtual, and even imagined spaces. Second, ecocomposition, as McDowell suggests it might be, is not about the interpretation of environmental writing, be it in local newspapers or any literary text. Most recently, Terrell Dixon offered a brief definition of *ecocomposition* in the beginning of his essay “Inculcating Wildness: Ecocomposition, Nature Writing, and the Regreening of the American Suburb.” He offers that ecocomposition classes are those “classes that emphasize reading and writing about nature and the environment” (77). Dixon’s

definition is a wonderful beginning point, and we will return to his definition and others' in chapter five, "Ecocomposition Pedagogy." For now we wish to borrow a portion of Dixon's definition and begin formulating our own by offering that ecocomposition is about the activity of writing, about the production of discourse. But Dixon's definition is only a small beginning. Let us explain in further detail.

Etymologically *ecocomposition* reflects *ecology*, a science that evolved specifically to study the relationships between organisms and their surrounding environment. Ernst Haeckel first defined "oecologie" in 1866 as "the total relations of the animal both to its organic and to its inorganic environment" and as "the study of all the complex interrelationships referred to by Darwin as the conditions of the struggle for existence" (quoted in Ricklefs, 1). Haeckel may as well have offered these words as the definition for contemporary composition studies. After all, composition studies in its post-cognitive, post-process, post-expressivist incarnation is also a study of relationships: relationships between individual writers and their surrounding environments, relationships between writers and texts, relationships between texts and culture, between ideology and discourse, between language and the world. Ecocomposition highlights the impact of the spaces in which discourse occurs, suggesting that most inquiries into these relationships do not fully account for the degree to which discourse is affected by the locations in which it originates and terminates. And, as we now discuss it, understanding these relationships is crucial to survival. Oppressive hegemonies manifest themselves in discourse; racial, cultural, sexist, classist oppression recurs through discourse. How we transgress those oppressive constructs, how we survive in them is a matter of discursive maneuvering. To paraphrase Haeckel, as Sid has explained in his essay "Writing Takes Place," 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." In other words, ecocomposition examines the relationships between discourse and environment. Ecocomposition inquires as to what effects discourse has in mapping, constructing, shaping, defining, and understanding nature, place, and environment; and, in turn, what effects nature, place, and environment have on discourse. As we have suggested and reiterate here because of the many misinterpretations of this aspect of ecocomposition, we mean *all environments*: classroom environments, political environments, electronic environments, ideological environments, historical environments, economic environments, natural environments. Ecocomposition must examine not only the relationships between discourse and "Nature," but the

relationships between discourse and any site where discourse exists. That is to say that while ecomposition has its roots in environmental ecology and social ecology, it must also turn its inquiry to all of the sites in which discourse is taught, studied, used, and lived. As Arlene Plevin writes, borrowing from Norman McLean, ecomposition “is more than smuggling in an essay about trees—or even discussing the powerful pull of students’ favorite places. It is arguably a more radical move, one capable of continuing a postmodern teacher’s desire to diffuse his or her authority—in decentering the classroom. It is a move which is able to reduce, even critically disrupt, the archetypal binaries of culture/nature, male/female, and even human/non-human” (148). That is to say, the prefix “eco” must not be misrepresented as simply “environmental” as it often is, but instead must be understood specifically as a study of relationships. Ecomposition is not “writing about trees”; ecomposition is the study of written discourse and its relationships to the places in which it is situated and situates.

Ecomposition locates writing in place and environment; it looks toward the ecology of language. Ecomposition resists discursive maneuvers that create dualistic splits such as nature/culture and (hu)man-made/natural; instead, ecomposition argues for a more holistic approach to seeing humans’ place in the world. That is, ecomposition contends that identifying nature as an object separate from human culture and life aligns it as an object that humans may act upon rather than within. This particular discursive position (identifying nature as split from the rational world of humans, and therefore subject to humans’ domination) has its roots in the scientific revolution’s intellectual will to dominance. Many of the contemporary discursive positions we will go on to critique have their origins, if not their clearest statements, in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century thinkers like Sir Francis Bacon and René Descartes. For Bacon, to know nature meant to disturb and annoy it (*natura vexata*), and he argued the anthropocentric view that “the whole world works together in the service of man; and there is nothing from which he does not derive use and fruit” (quoted in Marshall, 184). For Descartes, the understanding and control of nature are achieved by separation from the material world, followed by precise and careful measurement of it, in order to “make ourselves masters and possessors of nature” (quoted in Rifkin, 32). While these positions sound extreme today, they capture a human-centered arrogance still prevalent in many current discourses. Ecomposition stresses a connected world view over separation of human life from nonhuman life and biosystems, recognizing that such dualistic positions are and have been discursively constructed, and that more ecologically tuned perspectives are only possible through more holistic discursive forms.

Coupled with this agenda, ecocomposition seeks to engender a critical awareness of how discourse creates natural places and how all environments affect written discourse. In other words, ecocomposition disagrees with ecocritic Harry Crockett when he writes “we resist the idea that reality is socially constructed.” Ecocomposition identifies that all reality, including nature, is discursively constructed. “Environment” is (merely) an idea that is created through discourse. This is, of course, not to suggest that mountains, rivers, oceans, and trees do not actually exist. Such a suggestion would be pointless and unarguable. What we are suggesting, though, is that our only access to such things is through discourse, and that it is through language that we give these things or places meaning: historical, material, political, personal, natural, spiritual. For instance, Marine Life Conservation Districts in Hawaii, such as Kealakekua Bay (also known by its Westernized name, Captain Cook) prohibit fish collecting, fishing, and anchoring of boats. Violating these prohibitions results in severe penalties. In fact, conservation districts like this in Hawaii are often more fiercely protected by local residents than by federal authorities. A few miles north or south of Kealakekua Bay, however, fish collectors, fishermen, and boaters proliferate. It is doubtful that the fish or coral know that Kealakekua Bay has been named a Conservation District, yet in the eyes of most residents, the former is accorded almost sacred status while the latter is seen as an economic commodity. There is no intrinsic difference between a Marine Conservation district and the rest of Hawaii’s coastline; the difference is purely discursive. Similarly, the Florida State Park system has adopted the motto *The Real Florida* to identify natural Florida as opposed to developed Florida. *The Real Florida* is advertised on highway billboards and tourist brochures as the last bastions of natural Florida. The naming of certain fenced-off areas as “real” stands directly in opposition to all areas outside those fences which are “man-made.” For example, large sections of the Everglades have been designated as nature preserves, and as such they are accorded special significance, with particular rules regarding how and when humans might interact with them. However, huge sugarcane fields lie just a few miles from many of these preserves, complete with sugar processing plants and distribution centers. There is (or was) no real distinction between the land within the preserves and the land that is used for sugar farming other than the distinctions that have been discursively accorded to them by humans. As evidenced by the many recent debates on land use in Florida, sugar farmers and preservationists have radically different definitions of what the Florida Everglades is or should be. So in a sense, there is no objective environment separate from the words we use to represent it. Like Carl G. Herndl and Stuart C. Brown, we argue that “the environment

is not a thing you could go out and find in the world. Rather, it is a concept and an associated set of cultural values that we have constructed through the way we use language” (3).

That being said, however, we also note that ecocomposition addresses the current environmental crisis as a potentially catastrophic biospheric event that demands our consideration and action. Ecocomposition identifies the ecological relationships between humans and surrounding environments as dependent and symbiotic. It recognizes the decline of nature both discursively and materially. Like theorists Tom Jagtenberg and David McKie, we acknowledge the whole spectrum of our nonhuman physical environment as “so central to sustainable life that it undermines the very idea of space and the biophysical world as a context for human activity” (xii). While discourse does indeed shape our human conceptions of the world around us, discourse itself arises from a biosphere that sustains life. That is, while discourse “creates” the world in the human mind, the biospheric physical environment is the origin of life (and consequently, the human mind) itself. The relationship between discourse and environment is reciprocal. Similarly, the diversity and richness of language reflects the diversity of the world in which such language arises. For example, indigenous languages in two ecologically distinct locations, Alaska and Hawaii, reflect the geography and climate of each. The indigenous Hawaiian language has nearly as many terms and concepts (lexemes) to represent various forms of rainbows as the Eskimo language has for snow. In the Hawaiian language, we find the following terms for *rainbow*:

anuenue	rainbow
alaea	reddish rainbow
hakahakaea	greenish rainbow
onohi	rainbow fragment
uakoko	earth-clinging rainbow
kahili	standing rainbow shaft
luahoano	rainbow around sun or moon
punakea	barely visible rainbow

In Inuit, the best-known of the five Eskimo languages, we find the following terms for snow:

quanuk	snowflake
kanevvluk	fine snow particles
natquik	drifting snow particles
nevluk	clinging particles
aniu	fallen snow

muruaneq	soft, deep fallen snow
qetrar crust	on fallen snow
nutaryuk	fresh fallen snow

Our point here is not to count words, nor is it to suggest that one language is more complex than another. What we are suggesting is that our vocabulary says quite a lot about the particular environment in which we live. Language reflects place. So, in effect, preserving natural places, ecosystems, and the denizens of them is a move that preserves the fullness, depth, and precision of our discourse. As Nancy Lord (1997) writes in *Fish Camp: Life on an Alaskan Shore*:

Languages, after all, belong to places in the same way that living creatures do. They're indigenous to the places that spawn them, both in the words needed to identify and address the particulars of that place and in the structure needed to survive there. Anyone who's ever studied a foreign language knows that even a modest familiarity with its vocabulary and grammar provides fascinating insights into the ways that a culture thinks about itself, what it values, and how it fits its origins. (58)

In a sense, humans occupy two spaces: a biosphere, consisting of the earth and its atmosphere, which supports our physical existence, and a semiosphere, consisting of discourse, which shapes our existence and allows us to make sense of it. We see these two central spheres of human life—the biosphere and the semiosphere—as mutually dependent upon one another. Where a healthy biosphere is one that supports a variety of symbiotic life forms, a healthy semiosphere is one that enables differences to coexist and be articulated. In both a material and a discursive sense, differences are a critical measure of a system's health.

Having said that, we want to extend this definition to expand upon how this inquiry of relationships is a multi-faceted area of study which draws on many other areas of inquiry including composition studies, feminism and ecofeminism, cultural studies, ecology, literary criticism and environmentalism. In the pages that follow, we provide a more intricate explication of *ecocomposition* by first providing a detailed overview of the most significant facets of ecocomposition to date. As with our initial definition, ecocomposition must fracture within itself as those working inside of its loose borders direct their attentions toward sub-specialties and disagree with one another over theory, method, and teaching. It must provide diverse approaches to theories and pedagogies. In the next five chapters, we offer these further impressions of ecocomposition as a starting place.

Natural Discourse

Having now introduced ecocomposition as a study of the relationship between discourse and environment and expressed an understanding that environment is as much a construct of discourse as discourse is a product of environment, it would seem odd that we would suggest in our title that discourse could be natural. That is, it would seem that we have been arguing that there is no such thing as Natural Discourse. However, we want to point out that our title is meant to suggest the deeply enmeshed relationship between ecological thinking and discourse studies and to question the very relationships between nature and discourse by highlighting the uncomfortable and problematic “naturalness” of discourse. In other words, our title aims to draw attention to the “where” and “how” of language use, foregrounding the fact that discourse always occurs within particular environments, that these environments are integral to the construction of language and knowledge, and that particular acts of communication have their own nature according to the circumstances and locations that precipitated them. Let us not forget, in fact, just how dangerous discourse can be when it is made to seem “natural.” That is, oppressive discourses often maintain power when those discourses go unquestioned and are assumed to be an immanent and inherent part of things. We question not only the making natural of discourse, but also the very discourses that construct phenomena and objects as natural: natural discourse.

In the pages that follow, we continue our investigation into the relationships between environment and writing, place and discourse by first examining the academic and intellectual sites from which ecocomposition grows. Next, we consider the science of ecology and the evolution of ecological thinking and the ways that ecology might inform thinking in composition studies. We then explore the role of the activist intellectual and public writing in ecocomposition, inquiring into both the understanding of public spaces and the role of the intellectual in those spaces. Turning, then, from larger, public spaces, to classroom and pedagogical spaces, we analyze the ways in which ecocomposition pedagogies have evolved and the ways in which environmental issues have entered into composition classrooms. We offer approaches to developing ecocomposition pedagogies and strategies for ecocomposition classrooms. Finally, we turn to a study of the role of the personal in ecological thinking, critiquing the social constructionist assessment of the role of the individual, exploring the pathos of the ecology of writing, and ultimately turning to classical rhetoric to reconsider ecological thinking about discourse.

As we begin the rather large task of introducing ecocomposition, we take on a rather interesting project in research. This book only begins to

scratch the surface of a body of research that needs to be further explored. In fact, in many ways, this book takes on the role of introduction in a rather encyclopedic fashion, exploring a wide range of materials, often only in brief acknowledgment rather than in depth. Of course, such a glossing of some research prohibits an exhaustive, comprehensive examination of any one aspect of ecocomposition. However, we have intentionally attempted here to cover as much introductory territory as possible to both introduce ecocomposition and to open as many avenues of travel within ecocomposition as possible. Our goal is to promote exploration and theorization in specific areas within and without ecocomposition, and we hope that others will find this introduction useful, drawing on what they find here and opening new paths in ecocomposition. In his book *The Gutenberg Elegies*, Sven Birkerts explores the effects of technology on the future of a culture of books, and in this sometimes troubling commentary on literature and the “impact of technology on reading” Birkerts argues that the move toward technological literacies and away from more traditional book literacies is conspicuously marked by what he refers to as “the gradual displacement of the vertical by the horizontal—the sacrifice of depth to lateral range,” or as he explains it, “a shift from intensive to extensive reading” (72). What Birkerts argues is that when books were more rare, when texts were not easily available, readers spent more time digging for depths of meaning with each text. He argues that “in our culture, access is not a problem, but proliferation is” (72). Hence, he contends that contemporary readers tend “to move across surfaces, skimming, hastening from one site to the next without allowing the words to resonate inwardly. The inscription is light but covers vast territories” (72). Though we have some problems with Birkerts’ dismissal of contemporary readers and reading an act in which he claims “quantity is elevated over quality”—we do wish to borrow his metaphor of horizontal and vertical. This book is, unquestionably a horizontal study. It traverses wide territory, ranging from the history of ecology to public intellectualism to composition pedagogy to rhetoric and a host of other subjects. But this book crosses these territories to begin to draw early maps, to locate those very sites that demand further vertical inquiry. We envision *Natural Discourse: Toward Ecocomposition* specifically as a move toward ecocomposition research, as an introduction. We hope that as you read these introductory moves, you note locations in need of further study, sites ripe for research. As we mentioned earlier, this book is a first foray into defining ecocomposition as an inquiry; it is by no means an end.

