Teaching Environmental Justice with Rhetorical Theory: Ecofeminist Wayfinding, Emplacement, and Agency

Thus far I have experienced environmental justice pedagogy as a student more than as a teacher. As a graduate student in English Studies with a focus on rhetorical theory and ecofeminism, I have completed five courses in which my Professors built environmental justice and social justice issues into the core coursework. Some have included service-learning components, multimodal/media approaches, and community outreach efforts. My goal is to put into action the education I have received.

My approach to environmental justice is interdisciplinary, but I ground my pedagogical approach in American Indian scholarship, ecofeminism, and feminist pedagogies. Winona LaDuke’s *All Our Relations*, Gerald Vizenor’s *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*, Phaedra Pezzullo’s *Toxic Tourism,* Stacy Alaimo’s *Bodily Natures*, bell hook’s *Teaching Critical Thinking*, and Julie Jung’s *Revisionary Rhetoric* serve as examples of texts that influence my approach to environmental justice and teaching.

As a rhetorician my goal is to help students understand public argumentation strategies and develop critical awareness of ideological components—i.e. the values and belief systems that undergird environmental racism, sexism, and ecological destruction incurred by unchecked greed and capitalism. My goal is to empower students to take action and assert ethical agency in their own communities and in communities placed in harms way. The two may not be exactly the same, but expanding student accountability and shared responsibility for our emplacement in a web of relations is critical to my teaching goals. Ancient sophistic rhetoric included an activity termed *dissoi logio*—or understanding how both sides of an argument work in tandem to create a rhetorical situation. Embedded within this concept is a notion that privileges the “relativity” of knowledge in opposition to Aristotelian or Platonic Truth. Put differently, it is a way to see another person’s argument inside and out in order to move toward civil discourse and action. The neosophistic view is one that extends pedagogy beyond assessing skill mastery. In conjunction, the teacher’s objective is to foster critical awareness and ethical action in students.

As an ecofeminist my goal is to help student deploy rhetorical tactics to help mitigate environmental injustices incurred by human and nonhuman bodies in different places and spaces. To help students understand how to do this work, I ask them first to more critically engage their senses by understanding their emplacements within a built environment. This involves field investigation, which is the subject of my activity, which I call “Sensory Wayfinding.” Basically, I want students to be more aware of the substances they take into their bodies and how that impacts their rhetorical responses to a place and to each other. I also want them to consider how sensory intake would impact the rhetorical responses of people living in communities subject to negative environmental impacts.

Although my students are all individuals, they do share some common traits at my current institution—historically a teaching institution and “normal” school. Most of my students are white, middle-class, and more than fifty-percent are female. Many do not have a complex understanding of racism, classism, or sexism. Most do not question the colonial and capitalist patriarchal power structures that create gross disparities in access to education and places people of color closer to toxic waste. Case studies, readings in indigenous studies, and documentary films help me render visible what has been invisible in many of their experiences.