

Close Reading—and Close Writing—Environmental Justice
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As an English teacher equally concerned about the health of our global ecosystem and committed to the concept of environmental justice, I often find myself colliding with the disciplinary limits traditionally placed on the teaching of literary texts. Born and raised into the practice of “close reading”—the rigorous and sustained exploration of a text’s language, with the goal of constructing a sound explication of that text—we English teachers are warned away from considering, with our students, the factors outside the covers of a book that may have influenced its creation. Historical context, authorial intentions, and even the ethical orientation of a text all recede before our prime directive to present the text as a closed system, a self-contained object capable of providing its own array of complex meanings and interpretations. While this allows us great freedom to cultivate students’ sensitivity to things like tone, rhetoric, and syntax—faculties they will certainly need to navigate the information-dense experience of twenty-first century life—it also tends to promote a certain skepticism in their encounters with narratives of environmental justice. When we deliberately occlude the connections between a narrative and the experience on which it is based, as the strategy of close reading demands that we do, we create an additional barrier to students’ ability to engage affectively and ethically with that text, allowing students to sidestep the hard question of justice in favor of a more objective critique of someone else’s rhetoric.

I have never felt completely satisfied with my responses to this pedagogical conundrum, and the need for new insight is part of what drove me to apply for this workshop. But, over the last few years, I have developed two strategies which I think can help students to engage more meaningfully with issues of environmental justice in the literature classroom—and, as I will shortly explain, outside of it. My first strategy takes root in the very practice of close reading I have previously described, and focuses on a concept that is crucial to the study of literature: point of view. Point of view is the consideration of how authors use a narrative voice (or voices) to construct, over the course of a text, a character’s unique relationship to the world she inhabits, and analyzing that relationship can become the basis for a classroom discussion about how we, as a culture, relate to our world. This is especially true for texts that experiment with more than one point of view.

I have had some success, for instance, in teaching with T. C. Boyle’s novel *The Tortilla Curtain*, which juxtaposes the experience of two undocumented Mexican immigrants with that of two wealth suburbanites in the same two-mile stretch of southern Californian canyonland. As the suburbanites confront the fear of urban violence that drove them from the city and the hungry, displaced coyotes that now prey on their pets, the undocumented immigrants struggle with the very different environmental issues of exposure, racial prejudice, dangerous working conditions, and vulnerability to violent crime. Asking students to identify and compare passages which portray the same locations from different characters’ points of view can be very illuminating, particularly if this comparison is mapped, on a chalkboard, across a number of different shared locations. Helping students to become attentive to how race, class, and gender all play a

role in shaping point of view—and structuring interactions with our environment—can spur reflection on our own experience of environmental harm, as well as insight into what we do and do not know about others’ experience of the same environment.

Further affective and ethical engagement can be spurred by creating opportunities for firsthand experience with environmental justice issues at a local level. While the experiences portrayed in a novel might start a discussion about the differential experience of space and place, connecting these conversations to real-life disparities, particularly the ones that run through local communities, adds embodied knowledge to students’ analytical grasp—a far more vivid sense of what it might be like to move, breathe, eat, or sleep in the shadows that structural violence imposes on disenfranchised groups. This embodied knowledge might be gained in a number of ways, some of which I have tried in the classroom, and others of which I have encountered as a learner: asking students to research and write about an environmental justice issue in their home towns; bringing environmental justice activists into the classroom for face-to-face conversation; arranging a “toxic tour” with local experts who can demonstrate, firsthand, the impact of environmental burdens on nearby neighborhoods; or engaging students in a long-term service project that allows them to connect with an environmentally disenfranchised group.

Each of these approaches has its own unique set of complications in planning, implementation, and evaluation, but a key component for each, at least for students in the language arts, is to include opportunities for sustained reflective writing. In creating personal writing about an experience with environmental justice—whether that means recalling memories of community change, describing the sensory experience of trash incinerator, or trying to rearticulate the words of a guest speaker—students reorient themselves to language, becoming the producers, rather than consumers, of a point of view. Even as writing about such an experience adds an affective dimension to the issue of environmental justice, it also gives them further insight into the challenge of constructing one’s own subjectivity, precisely the challenge that environmental justice activists face in making others aware of the harm their communities face on a daily basis. Helping students to understand not just the technical issues that create environmental injustice, but also the problems of representing environmental harm in language, usefully disrupts—at least in a pedagogical sense—the all-too-common Not-In-My-Back-Yard response to environmental justice that Robert Bullard characterized twenty years ago. It links the restrictive, but productive practice of close reading to the creative process of close writing, creating a far more holistic form of learning.