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Re-visioning Nature: Rethinking the Human-Nature Relationship in the Anthropocene

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Abstract

The great questions of life that have always been explored in literature and books, often, become catalysts for change. We live during the anthropocene period of unparalleled, human-caused, systemic disruption of the biosphere and the very processes that sustain life on Earth. As such, it is important that we critically assess the beliefs and corresponding actions that have led us to our present state. By allowing destructive habits of being to disintegrate, we can then direct our intellectual, emotional, individual, and collective energy toward eco-social restoration. The paper considers how the convergence of ecological thought and poetic inquiry can support the learning of embodied and restorative cultural practices. Responding to the present state of cultural disconnection from life's organic cycles, it strives to re-story, in form and content, the dominant Western cultural narrative. Eco-social restoration is discussed within the context of popular environmental thought, traditional education, eco-poetry, and the politics of place. The paper solidifies the thought that we need to remember that there are other humans and creatures living on this planet and that life is inherently interdependent. The paper draws on the ecological processes, the living cycles, of breathing, soil and seed, and water as metaphors for the restoration envisioned in Leslie M. Browning's *Oak Wise* and Lynne Cherry's *A River Ran Wild*.

Keywords: Anthropocene, ecological thought, eco-poetry, eco-ethics, eco-social restoration, politics of place

The ways that we come to know about the world are directly influenced by relationships that exist between and among places and people. Our cultural experiences, directly and indirectly, communicate information about our individual and collective

consciousness. From them we learn about how narrowly, broadly, significantly, or insignificantly people in the western world understand the concept of eco-social inter-subjectivity. Cultural production, as both process and product, reflects our epistemological and ontological perspective on life. As stated by Konai Thaman, cultural products are not merely "social abstractions; they are embodiments of our sense of self in the world" (241). When interpreted semiotically as a text, the western world's "culture of detachment, alienation, and individualism" represents nothing short of anthropocentric egocentrism (Hill, S., Watson, S., & Wilson, K.). The rivers, the air, the ozone layer, the endangered species, cultures, and places are evidence that the capitalist ethic that supports exploitation, resource consumption (where people and places are understood as resources), and unlimited expansion is disconnected from life-supporting processes and is unsustainable to say the least.

Due to the rhetoric of de-contextualized individualism and anthropocentrism in the dominant western culture, the concepts of both self and community are highly ambiguous. Again, community emerges from strong relationships between selves and non-selves. Barbara Kingslover writes, "Among the greatest of gifts is to know one's place" (40). Co-extensive with "knowing one's place" is to have a sense of connectedness with "time present and time past...both present in time future" (Eliot 11). Knowing our place is to feel the interrelatedness of times, places, peoples, and stories and to be at home in a world that we love as ourselves. It is a dynamic and creative process of developing intimacy in our relationships. It cannot be achieved intellectually; it must be embodied. Through knowing one's place we understand and feel the extent to which we conspire and breathe with each other.

Changing the stories we live by means changing the form, re-visioning the content, and re-imagining our relationships. Leslie M. Browning's *Oak Wise and* Lynne Cherry's *A River Ran Wild* – make an effort to turn away from the dominant western culture of disconnection and instead pursue cooperative relationships between self and other, thought and emotion, culture and nature. One way or another, we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way; we are also living the stories we imagined and planted – knowingly or unknowingly in ourselves. "If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives" (King 154).

In this context, Lynne Cherry's tales attempt to foster emotional attachment between child readers and the natural world. Nicholas Tucker argues that "fiction has always been a medium wherein the child's here and now can be transcended, enabling the child to move into foreign worlds and different social roles" (168). Leslie M. Browning's eco-poetic poems in *Oak Wise* keep exploring the universe. Such is the magic that having already seen something, they may suddenly make us 'see' it for the first time; we may think twice in a moment of recognition, question our responsibility and even act upon it:

> Unnourished by the modern
> We all inwardly ache for the simplicity of home.
> Not the home where we were raised
> But the home from whence all mankind came – the flowering natural world. (Browning 118)

Eco-poetics does not necessarily mean nature poetry. The poem itself, in a way, is a microcosmic ecosystem in which it dwells. Most often, nature manifests itself in the work indirectly – often in the shape of a dominant worldview in the work. The kind of poetry explored here talks about a restorative process that connects and heals. There is a clear movement from representing humans and nature as being distinct characters to melding humans and nature together into a representation that literally unifies them in origin, existence, and end. Eco-poetics is not

only about ecology and poetry, but also about affecting change; the poem encompasses not only the present landscape of the human-nature relationship, but the potential future as well. It tackles issues that affect human beings and their environments equally: struggles for land ownership; the fight for environmental justice in less-developed countries; modernity's pernicious appetite for natural resources; or the adequacy or inadequacy of different modes of environmental communication. Eco-poetry of waste can contemplate the horrific prospect of pollution and destruction on a global scale and will continue to develop many further thematic and formal strategies in the future, and this synopsis is far from exhaustive.

Browning's use of the green environ in her poems is more biocentric than anthropocentric, because human agency is removed, and portrayal of nature's own agency is created. This problematises the moments of potential anthropocentrism through a subtle sense of environmental ethics, bringing forward the habitats and histories that non-human living things have. From this sense of ethical commitment, there is also an emerging sense of accountability brought forward through her poems.

Poetry in the anthropocene must acknowledge the extensive and insidious changes that human beings have made to our planet, and how these changes affect us. Eco-poetic engagement with filth, rubbish, toxicity, decay, radiation, ashes and relics requires a particular poetic mode: one that Browning perfects as she engages with the detritus, wreckage, and fallout and remains that human beings leave. Her poetry is also the poetry of habitat: it explores our relationship to the environments and ecologies that surround us, the alterations that we have made to them, and our imbrications within their systems. The visual form and sonic qualities of her poems embody their environmental engagement.

In *Oak Wise,* Browning descends with the reader into an intimate account of one seeker reflecting on the biological mother – the earth, brilliantly reintroducing the ecological sensitivities of the old earth-based faiths, highlighting their relevance in this current age of environmental crises. Reminding the reader of early American ecologists, John Muir and Aldo Leopold, she calls upon us not only to contemplate, but also to act. *Oak Wise* is gentle, yet unrelenting in its exhortation of humankind to return to the land and a more conscious, spiritually engaged way of life where the poet, for instance, in "The Journey Home" longingly cries out for an untouched pristine place that has not been spoilt by human hands:

> Give me a place yet to be known.
> Apart from all that has been made
> By the hands of man,
> That I might be happy
> And know a full life.
> And the wrong done
> To the earth and to the soul
> May be righted,
> In this place that I shall dwell with those I love. (Browning 138)

The title, *Oak Wise,* indeed gives a clarion call to the humankind to decentre their egotistical and deeply alienating intelligence and to align and affiliate themselves with a wisdom that predates humankind and is much more life-nurturing and all-encompassing than human intelligence and rationality, aimed at self-indulgence, have ever been. The secondary title, *Poetry Exploring an Ecological Faith,* amply indicates and exhorts humankind to reconfigure their faith from being human-centric to an ecological one that is imbued with giving, mutuality and an abiding inter-connectivity.

Oak Wise has poems that in some way reflect a highly developed consciousness of the natural world. Browning realises the necessity of a "bio-centric" (Derr and McNamara 21) poetry that responds to global environmental degradation. Her poems imbibe Lawrence

Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* that enlists "presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history"… that "the human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest" … "human accountability to the environment" … environment as a "process rather than a constant", thereby, suggesting a shift from anthropocentric thinking toward environmental ethics. (Buell 7-8).

Browning's poetry has consciously been influenced by sensitivity to ecological thinking, especially in the area of energy flow, cyclic renewal, bioregionalism and the interdependency of all organisms within an ecosystem. Thus, living in harmony with and remaining alert to nature's speech is the seed-bed of her worldview. Her faith in a bio-centric ethic comes through in these lines from the poem "Evergreen":

> During your season of slumber
> We are left to fend for ourselves.
> Yet you do not simply abandon us;
> You give us fire to ward off the demon frost
> And the wisdom of preservation,
> That we may have a portion of your harvest
> To keep us hearty until your return. (Browning 23)

Browning's poetry establishes relationships so as to sustain society. Her concern is with the category of place and hence with the ideal of re-inhabitation, that is, who we are and who we continue to be, is radically tied to what our surroundings are and continue to be. This concern reverberates in her poem "Living Memory":

> I wish to melt into you
> And research the history of all life,
> In the end to emerge back into this body
> With a better understanding of who my people are
> And where we have been.
> ...To discover if, on the whole, we are tyrants
> Or if the traits of love have somehow prevailed to vindicate us. (Browning 48)

At the core of her poetry, lies deep love for mother earth and a welcoming of life with its scent, colour, sap and all its pain and affliction. As a staunch guardian of ecological awareness, she celebrates the glory of the landscape. Though making and re-making go on in nature continuously, the poet rues the destruction of the bio-diversity in the modern times:

> Yet the health of your body wears thin, doesn't it;
> For we take too much
> And will not let you replenish yourself,
> So many of us having been transmuted by our greed – No longer your loving child but a leeching parasite. (Browning 51)

At several junctures, Browning exhibits her concerns regarding deforestation complaining of the ecological degeneration. In the poem "Living Memory", she speaks out:

> We cut down the trees
> The lungs through which you breathe
> And, while you could regenerate from our theft,
> Your natural cycles are impeded
> As the few maples and oaks that remain
> Yield their bounty of seeds unto tar roads,
> While their potential saplings
> Are crushed by passersby. (Browning 51)

The poet acts as the sentinel of time and clime. She assigns herself the task of awakening the humankind, exhorting them to rise and act in accordance with some higher principles of eco-awareness and eco-living. She rejects the view of the organism as autonomous or isolated from its ecological surroundings and the restriction of the normative principle, of everyone's equal right to live, to humans alone. Frequently, her poems refer to natural processes that take place on a scale much beyond the human sense of time or space.

> Collected within the fibres of your being
> Is a comprehensive archive
> Of all that has ever taken place;
> Not just since the creation of man
> But since the beginning of you –
>
> Oh predecessor of us all. (Browning 45)

The core of Browning's poetry resides in the rejection of anthropocentrism and the pursuit of an eco-centric standpoint where nature occupies centre-stage and is thus not looked upon as a receptacle for human activities. Her anti-anthropocentric vision shifts the focus from the narcissistic individual to entire ecosystems and carries the will to challenge and reconfigure contemporary environmental thought. Owing to the pervasive ethical stances of the poems and the deep ecological consciousness of *Oak Wise,* bonds of greater intimacy and interdependence come up between nature and man. Browning's poems espouse a kind of ecological ethic in which human good and ecological good are not mutually exclusive and depend on an overhauling of non-sustainable, exploitative developmental models.

Children and adults use different tools to comprehend the world around them. By reducing the complexities of everyday life to a series of symbolic forces and choices, child readers can draw parallels between "their own concepts of themselves and the reality in which they live" (Tucker 168). Children and ecology seem to go together naturally as much rhetoric is about the future of children. Bob Henderson, Merle Kennedy and Chuck Chamberlin, in "Pedagogical Response to *The Lorax*", ask: "Are our central convictions concerning how we dwell on planet Earth the root cause of our social and ecological disorder? If so, how do we as educators engage with our students – of any age – concerning the dysfunctional binaries we as a culture have created?" (128). Cherry, in the preface to *A River Ran Wild*, echoes her vision and purpose when she says: "I hope this story inspires its readers to be the people who try to make a difference in this world" (n.pag.). In her texts, nature is not a fragmented one-dimensional landscape, but a vibrant, wild and interdependent community. *A River Ran Wild* offers a comprehensive representation of the relationship between humans and the natural world. Cherry's portrayal of the unique factors that come together during an environmental crisis is reminiscent of Dr. Seuss' *The Lorax*. She focuses on the inherent dependence of humanity upon nature for survival and on the equally important fact that nature does not need humanity for its continuance. Nature was in full bloom before human settlement appeared along the river and polluted it, upsetting the ecological balance.

The depiction of nature as a web of several participating actors, all of which influence and impact each other, echoes Donna Haraway's vision depicted in "The Promises of Monsters" that:

> If the world exists for use as 'nature', this designates a kind of relationship, an achievement among many actors, not all of them human, not all of them organic, not all of them technological. In its scientific embodiments as well as in other forms, nature is made, but not entirely by humans (297).

Cherry's eco-centric works do not place human interests above those of the non-human world. Instead, she gives humans, and especially modern civilization, only a fleeting part in her stories of the earth's history. *A River Ran Wild* goes a step ahead and shows people willing to sacrifice their own desires so that other creatures may live. In the introduction to her book, Cherry quotes from John Berger's *Restoring the Earth*:

> Imagine a world where the rivers and streams flow clean again, brilliant and teeming with fish. The air is fresh and crystalline. The earth, once bared and robbed of its topsoil, now is green with healthy vegetation. This vision of Nature thriving and restored can become reality (n.pag.).

A River Ran Wild is Cherry's effort to illustrate for children the environmental issues: fears about the destruction or disappearance of natural landmarks such as rivers and rain-forests; the threats of extinction, erosion and pollution; diminishing natural resources: and the aesthetic aspects of nature that are threatened by environmental degradation. It is through dreams that Cherry communicates these issues: the Indian Owean's dream, in which his ancestor's tears fall upon the dirty river until it is cleansed, is an allegory for the vision of the river's clean-up.

A River Ran Wild, like many classic children's tales, features animals that talk and have feelings – characteristics which, though implausible to adults, go unquestioned by most children. In Cherry's work, truth is not always synonymous with scientific accuracy for she believes that children's stories can offer valid metaphysical, sociological and psychological truths. She explores two contrasting ways of perceiving 'nature'. On the one hand she examines the European settlers' view of nature either as the embodiment of evil or as a collection of commodities, in dire need of human intervention and control. On the other, she observes the natives' view of nature involving a mystical correspondence between all living and non-living things. It is through these natives that Cherry presents her vision for they are the ones who take action to restore the environment. She advocates giving children a healthy understanding of their strengths, pride in past successes through historical perspective and some sense that the future may be an improvement over the past rather than emphasising limits, distrust of technology or gloomy scenarios. She banks on a hopeful tomorrow for the children by presenting confrontation with the horrors of environmental degradation resulting in restoration of nature:

> Once again the river runs wild through a towering forest greenway. Red-tailed hawks and barred owls live here...Nashua is what we call it – River with the pebbled bottom (n.pag.)

Cherry tells an intriguing story with bright, visually pleasing pictures that evoke complex symbolic meanings, and engages her readers in several important ideological questions regarding the relationship between economics and the environment, the concept of sustainability and how it can be put into practice along with the positive and negative implications that human activity has on the environment. The old mechanistic, anthropocentric worldview must be replaced by a new eco-centric paradigm. Donna King presses the need for a radically new set of social relations that will require "a highly politicized and socialized environmentalism, one that looks well beyond the dominant ideologies of capitalism, patriarchy, racism, and liberal individualism" (119). Free-market capitalism and vestigial state-sponsored socialism need to be replaced; new concepts of nature that reconfigure our social and ecological relations need to be embraced.

Lynne Cherry encourages her readers to look beyond problematic constructions such as 'progress' and 'invention' to find environmental solutions rooted in a vastly different perspective of nature. A holistic environment solution can only be achieved by engaging in a complex dialogue with other actors within nature and culture and understanding that western ideologies and problem-solving methods do not have all the answers. The recognition of other perspectives and cultures necessitates a differentiation between the cultures of 'self' and 'other' and Cherry's text dualistically encourages approaching nature from a local and indigenous perspective, as she explores indigenous relations to the river and the land, before the "times of progress and invention" (n.pag.).

A careful reading of Cherry's text reveals the ways that white settler culture and knowledge comes to dominate the intellectual

and physical landscape of Nashua. The land itself is renamed, individual indigenous people go unrecognized, Western capitalist concepts of ownership and productivity are imposed, and the surroundings of the river are transformed from an indigenous to a settler world. In order for the settler way of life to quickly predominate, traditional territories are viewed as wilderness, as devoid of humanity and culture (Braun 88). A dehumanized landscape almost invites settler conquest. *A River Ran Wild* reassures settler people that they belong there, that through their hard work, perseverance, and determination, they are entitled to the land. In sad contrast, indigenous people – through abandonment and a lack of dedication to settler ideals like farm labour – seem to have lost that right. In Cherry's hands, *A River Ran Wild* is the story of settler people moving into the future, and of the indigenous people receding into the past. It is the story of western values and ways of interacting with the land and its people overtaking and displacing local connections and knowledge.

Lynne Cherry and Browning choose to focus on contemplation of such 'root causes'. Their narratives represent deforestation and habitat loss as direct results of human action, the historical displacement of indigenous cultures and how contemporary human lifestyles and the western notion of progress are to blame for this. The emotion that is rife in Browning's poems is echoed in Cherry's landscapes as well. In *A River Ran Wild*, Cherry portrays an emotional connection between her characters and the land. Luitgard Wundheiler argues that "children perceive the world in terms of their emotions rather than an objective manner" (23). Cherry's work capitalizes on such a perception where her characters experience a strong sense of loss when nature is harmed. Sobel, a child psychologist, argues that "early childhood is characterized by a *lack* of differentiation between the self and the other. Children feel implicitly drawn to baby animals; a child feels pain when someone else scrapes her knee" (13). However, Sobel maintains that "rather than forcing separateness, we want to cultivate that sense of connectedness so that it can become the emotional foundation for the more abstract ecological concept that everything is connected to everything else" (13).

An important element of ecological literacy is recognizing what defines nature and its relationship with humanity. Liberal environmental discourse falsely constructs society and nature as a conflicting binary, wherein nature is a distinct 'other' that can be exploited, dominated or feared. It has been argued by Donna King that "ideologies of patriarchy and capitalism, racism and liberal individualism forget or deny the simple yet profoundly radical fact that humans *and* nature are interdependent" (119). Everything – the quality of our consciousness, our concerns and priorities – changes when this interconnectedness is acknowledged, embraced and embodied. Society and nature have a shared continuum of everyday experience, mutual origins and have a symbiotic relationship.

From Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* to Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, and from Lawrence Buell's *Writing for an Endangered World* to *The End of Nature* by Bill McKibben, the debate has been on the consequences of the interface between nature and people's activities on the planet. The shift from the preservation of nature to capitalism in the wake of frontier global capitalism is fundamentally ensconced in different modes of humanity's relation to earth. Ernst Fisher highlights the malignant nature of capitalism:

> Capitalism turned everything into a commodity. With a hitherto unimaginable increase in production and productivity, extending the new order dynamically to all parts of the globe and all areas human existence, capitalism dissolved the old world into a cloud of whirling molecules, destroyed all direct relationships between producer and

> consumer and flung all products onto an anonymous market to be bought or sold. (Fischer 50)

The corporeality of this practice finds resonance in an ever more globalised state of oppression and dominance characterised by movement of resources from the periphery to the centre as well as destruction of the natural world of the periphery nations. In most of the poems in the collection, *Oak Wise*, Browning speaks poignantly about the wanton destruction of our natural neighbours, the flora, fauna, and rivers, by capitalist practice, ideas echoed by Cherry.

The dominant narrative pattern in western culture problematically conceptualizes and enacts a limited understanding of 'environment'. By moving through issues of ecology, sustainability, cultural ecology, and eco-social ethics, it becomes apparent that a radical cultural shift is required if we are to reciprocate and be here for good in every sense. Some stories, for example traditional western 'master narratives', dichotomize profit and loss, right and wrong, centre and periphery, privileged and unprivileged, and intentionally usurp, dominate, and undermine other equally valid stories, stories that embody non-dominating ways of life. The dominant narrative pattern within western culture, the story that we live, that we teach to our children, seems to be more dissociative than integrative, and evidence little regard for the circles of life, for the blessing that is breathing.

Orr argues that "environmental issues are complex and cannot be understood through a single discipline or department" (90), thereby implying that environmental issues cannot be understood through reading a single type of text. The works of Leslie M. Browning and Lynne Cherry are all about fuelling an environmentally provoking dialogue, to re-vision nature and direct our intellectual, emotional, individual, and collective energy toward eco-social restoration.

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