



TEXT

Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/>

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Eco-autobiography as a “meshy” and fluid genre for representing life stories beyond the human

Abstract:

The under-studied genre of eco-autobiography offers a compelling space to explore entanglements between humans and environments in life narratives and in the context of the climate crisis. I argue a framework for eco-autobiography should include a stronger focus on the “enmeshment” between humans and environment to reflect this interconnectedness. Ecocritic Timothy Morton’s (2012) concept of the “mesh” challenges traditional, hierarchical models of existence, and coupled with notions of fluidity in Blue Humanities scholarship, is a ripe metaphor for such a genre that resists hierarchies where, as Morton points out, there is no absolute centre or edge and therefore no dominant or default identity in a life story. This life story then, can include environments, inanimate objects, weather systems, diverse species, and bodies of water. Using Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *Braiding sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge and the teaching of plants* (2015) as a case study, in this article I explore how drawing on notions of enmeshment and fluidity in eco-autobiographical writing can illuminate the intersections between affect, environment and embodiment to represent life stories beyond the human.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

Eco-autobiography, life writing, ecocriticism, ecological thinking, *Braiding sweetgrass*

Introduction

Eco-autobiography is an under-studied genre of life writing that Smith and Watson (2010) define as a narrative that “interweaves personal experience with the story of the fortunes, conditions, geography and ecology of a region” (p. 268). The term first appeared in an article by Perreten (2003) to identify and analyse a type of autobiographical text that enables nature or landscape writers to discover “a new self in nature” (p. 1). The defining features of an eco-autobiographical text, as outlined by Perreten, include a “symbiotic relationship between the environment and the self” (p. 2), an “autobiographical voice shaped by the natural setting” (p. 2), a “close interaction between author and setting” (p. 2), and an autobiographical narrative where the natural setting provides the “layers of experience” (p. 3) that constitute a life story. Pryor expands on Perreten’s definition, stating:

... with its attention to the person-place symbiosis, eco-autobiography allows for place and space to be recreated as terrains that transcend the physical, that reflect and mould the autobiographical psyche. The autobiographical voice is shaped by the natural setting it interacts with, achieving a kind of intertextuality between internal and external reflection. (Pryor, 2017, p. 392)

The entanglement between inner and outer landscapes is what renders eco-autobiography a compelling genre for grappling with the affective and embodied impacts of the climate crisis on humans and environments. Eco-autobiography provides life writers with a critical framework to examine how individuals are affected by their environments emotionally, bodily and materially and to include these environments as essential characters in one’s life story. As Pryor writes, “in giving voice to the landscape’s mood, memory, solitude, and wildness, place becomes geographic, created and remembered, formed and forming” (2017, p. 392). In this way, eco-autobiography offers the potential to explore notions of both reciprocity and complicity by reflecting on how we are “formed” by place, and how our interactions with environments, in turn, form them – our footprints change the makeup of the soil in the ground, we enact our agency to decide what is nurtured and what is destroyed. We are always in collaboration with our environments. Interrogating these interactions in eco-autobiographical writing allows for deep reflection on the way that our material bodies are implicated in material places, and how this plays into life narratives. If we can imagine environments as extensions of the self, then we can imagine expanded life stories.

Cardell (2020) notes that, “In Australia, as Melanie Pryor has observed, eco-autobiography is a complex space for the examination of self and nature, one that holds the promise of greater communication and understanding in relation to the natural world but that also risks instating a familiar dichotomy” (p. 5). This “familiar dichotomy” Cardell is referring to, one can assume, is one that reinforces “nature” as separate from “us”. Alaimo (2009) claims that “the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from ‘the environment’” (p. 22), and eco-autobiographical texts encapsulate this fusion of self and environment. For material ecocritics like Alaimo (2009), the human becomes “enmeshed” (p. 23), “entangled” (p. 24) or “vibrant matter” (p. 25) amongst other matter, and thus the human as a category appears increasingly obsolete and inadequate. Carlin (2017) writes: “In situating the human within the bigger context

of the more-than-human we are called upon to change the ways we think and act; and moreover the stories that we tell and how we tell them” (p. 5). White and Whitlock (2021) reinforce the strengths of eco-autobiography to address these issues and the kinds of stories we tell, noting as an example the “ecobiography” (Koncharr and Snyder, 1996) that White is working on about the famous botanist Georgia Molloy, who “has been the subject of several significant biographies to date” (White & Whitlock, 2020, p. 4). However, as they outline, “it is only in ecobiography that the specimens she collects feature as significant life forms” (White & Whitlock, 2021, p. 4). Eco-autobiography therefore, can provide a space to consider new ways of telling life stories that include other life forms. However, in order to fully resist falling into these “familiar dichotomies” as outlined by Cardell, a framework for eco-autobiography should include a stronger focus on the “enmeshment” between humans and environments, rather than continuing to position humans and other life forms as distinctly separate and different from one another. Buell (2003) writes that,

... since Rachel Carson, the environmental crisis has rapidly evolved and substantially changed in form, not just in nature, but also in human discourse about it. Announcing itself as apocalypse, environmental crisis has been debunked, has resisted debunking, has been reworked, and has been dramatically diversified and expanded, resurfacing in unusual new forms. (p. ix)

Eco-autobiography is, arguably, one of these “unusual new forms” that subvert traditional understanding of life writing that positions the human perspective as the most valuable. I argue that eco-autobiography is a starting point to imagine an expanded genre that can represent entanglements and reciprocal thinking. White (2017) notes that Indigenous Australian memoirs reflect elements of ecobiography, as an Indigenous worldview is one where nature and the self are interconnected and the relationship is grounded in reciprocity. Therefore many of these ideas are not novel, however, drawing from an Indigenous worldview to integrate these notions into an eco-autobiographical framework can help challenge dominant ideas that centralise and value the default “life” as one that reflects a colonial, patriarchal, Western mindset. To challenge these dominant perspectives, an eco-autobiographical framework should reflect notions of reciprocity and environmental agency, and represent how environments and humans are interconnected. Such approaches writers might take to do so is through personification of environments, and by teasing out the intersections of bodies and environments by exploring affective exchanges. Drawing from Blue Humanities and ecocritical scholarship, I propose that eco-autobiography be approached as a “meshy” and fluid genre to imagine life narratives that extend beyond the boundaries of the human body and lifespan. In exploring new ways of representing environments, eco-autobiography might also offer a space for life writers to reflect on their place within the “mesh”, and how actions contribute to climate collapse.

Eco-autobiography as a meshy, fluid genre

White (2020), describes the importance of incorporating the environment into notions of the self in autobiography: “If we cannot have a life without the lives of other inhabitants such as fungi, bacteria, air, or orchids, then it becomes desirable, in creating an autobiography, to include the lives that sustain and shape it: the *autos* of a biography should include our

environment” (p. 15). This definition builds upon Konchar Farr and Snyder’s (1996) original term, ecobiography, which they describe as a form of life writing that represents “a dynamic network” that makes up the “self’s ecosystem” (p. 203). This ecosystem they write, “encompasses Nature”, but it also “includes God, family, friends, literature, history, and archeological artefacts as its constituent parts”, elements that are connected to the “indeterminate, loose-bordered, dialogic entity called the Self” (p. 203). Scholars – Alaimo (2010), Bennett (2009), Morton (2012) and Haraway (2016) – working in the interdisciplinary field of ecocriticism might describe this “dynamic network” as a kind of entanglement – the notion of a deeply interconnected, enmeshed and fluid relationship between humans and non-humans, and one that suggests the boundaries between self and other are more porous than we might think. To encapsulate this theory of interconnectedness, Alaimo (2010) offers their theory of “trans-corporeality”, Bennett (2009) uses the term “vibrant matter”, and Haraway (2016) conceives of “sympoiesos” or a “making-with” environments. Morton (2012) calls this interconnectedness the “mesh”. He writes:

“Mesh” can mean the holes in a network and threading between them. It suggests both hardness and delicacy. [Mesh] has uses in biology, mathematics, and engineering and in weaving and computing—think stockings and graphic design, metals and fabrics. It has antecedents in *mask* and *mass*, suggesting both density and deception. By extension, “mesh” can mean “a complex situation or series of events in which a person is entangled; a concatenation of constraining or restricting forces or circumstances; a snare” (19). In other words, it’s perfect. (Morton, 2012, p. 28)

Morton lands on the term “mesh” over other terms such as “web” or “network”, to represent “the interconnectedness of all living and non-living things” (p. 7) due to its expansiveness and flexibility. He writes: “All life forms are the mesh, and so are all dead ones, as are their habitats, which are also made up of living and nonliving beings... We drive around using crushed dinosaur parts” (p. 29). The concept of “mesh” can provide a framework to scholars of eco-autobiography to reflect these entanglements between the self and environments. To represent the “mesh” and connections between all forms of existence – dinosaurs and cars, for example – Morton (2012) suggests the practice of what he calls “ecological thought” or a “thinking of interconnectedness”. According to Morton (2012), the ecological thought, like memory, doesn’t just occur “in the mind”. It’s a practice and a process of becoming fully aware of how human beings are connected with other beings – “animal, vegetable, or mineral” (p. 7). Morton’s (2012) framework for thinking of interconnectedness provides a potential pathway for fostering a deeper sense of kinship and care between all beings by destroying imagined hierarchies that place the human above all others in eco-autobiographical writing. Morton (2012) writes:

Every single life form is literally familiar: we’re genetically descended from them. Darwin imagines an endlessly branching tree. In contrast, mesh doesn’t suggest a clear starting point, and those “clusters” of “subordinate groups” are far from linear ... Each point of the mesh is both the centre and edge of a system of points, so there is no absolute centre or edge. (Morton, 2012, p. 29)

In this way, Morton’s concept of the “mesh” challenges traditional, hierarchical models of existence, offering eco-autobiographical writers a framework to explore how the self is enmeshed within a vast, non-linear network of relationships, where no single being or entity holds dominance over another. Smith and Watson (2010) state, “An entire autobiographical genre may be established around a spatial metaphor, as with the ‘interior landscape’ that spiritual life narrators draw from” (p. 47.) I argue that eco-autobiography, with its foregrounding of place and space, calls for a stronger spatial metaphor to reflect the entanglement and interconnectedness of interior and exterior landscapes, or the “meshiness” of environmental life narratives. Morton’s (2012) “mesh” is a ripe metaphor to establish such a genre. The “meshiness” of eco-autobiography as a genre can work to resist hierarchies where, as Morton points out, there is no absolute centre or edge, and therefore, no dominant story or default identity for a life story. This life story then, can include inanimate objects, weather systems, diverse species and bodies of water. Smith and Watson (2010) write, “Reading life writing as foregrounding spatial dynamics across geographic borders and forging new alliances with readers suggests how new hybrid identities and global practices are transacted or contested in geopolitical space” (Smith & Watson, 2010, p. 46). The parameters of eco-autobiography invites narrators to reflect on their positionality within geographic, political, and social spaces, and their role in the mesh or vast network, and becomes a means of resisting dominant colonial and patriarchal narratives. Through the foregrounding of spatial dynamics and cross-border identities, this genre creates space for alternative stories that challenge hierarchical power structures and contest hegemonic understandings of place and identity. In doing so, it forges new alliances with readers and promotes hybrid identities that resist the impositions of colonial and patriarchal frameworks.

Ecocritical concepts of entanglement, interconnectedness and mesh are suited to the techniques and intention of eco-autobiographical narratives, which include the story of the “fortunes, conditions, geography and ecology of a region” (Smith & Watson, 2010, p. 20) and the “symbiotic relationship” between the environment and the self, as described by Pereten (2003). “Symbiosis” refers to a cooperative and mutually beneficial situation, “characterised by or being a close, cooperative, or interdependent relationship” (Merriam-Webster). Symbiotic relationships between humans and environments are not always obvious. The dominant narrative appears to be one where humans are destructive towards environments, but there is ample potential for narratives of humans and environments beyond colonial conquests that reflect relationships grounded in nurturing reciprocity. Eco-autobiographical texts can represent these kinds of relationships through ecological thinking. “Ecological thinking”, according to Morton (2010), is recognising our experience as, “radical intimacy, coexistence with other beings, sentient and otherwise” (p. 8). This “thinking of interconnectedness” (Morton, 2010, p. 15) according to Morton (2010), can generate “care and concern for beings, no matter how uncertain we are of their identity, no matter how afraid we are of their existence” (p. 19). The metaphor of the mesh allows life writers to embrace ecological thinking. A mesh is defined by the presence of holes, through which fluid matter can leak. Within eco-autobiography, the environment and the self are fluid and flow into one stream rather than running parallel as separate narratives. Drawing from Blue Humanities scholarship to expand on the metaphor of the mesh in eco-autobiography conjures other spatial metaphors, such as

the connective tissues of waterways, the entanglement of underwater roots, and the leakiness of bodies and emotions. The holes in a mesh allow for water to flow through. This meshy, fluid thinking is a pathway to breaking down imagined boundaries between the self and the environment, as the material body blends into place, and the self becomes enmeshed with the environment. As Oppermann (2023) writes,

What emerges from this confluence of oceanography, limnology, and literary and cultural studies is a navigable “fluid poetics” (Jue and Ruiz 2021, 2), which makes the field undeniably “characterised by disciplinary fluidity” (Bakker 2019). Since all water environments are ontologically fluid sites, fluid poetics is the right mode of reflecting on and representing the conceptual, sociocultural, and ecological. (Oppermann, 2023, p. 10)

Campbell (2020) notes that in the recent works of Blue Humanities scholars, such as Mentz and Brayton, “the turn towards saltwater enables the emergence of fresh ecocritical perspectives which contest the ‘stable’ and grounded discourses of ‘green’ ecology” (Mentz, 2015, p. xxix). (Campbell, 2020, p. 2), and Heise (2006) notes that the first-wave ecocritical stance of “stability and harmony” has instead turned towards a “more complex image of ecosystems as dynamic, perpetually changing, and often far from stable or balanced” (2006, p. 510). The shifting terrains of place and self in the context of ecological crisis can be explored through theories offered by Blue Humanities scholarship to represent the “changing story of our lives” (Smith & Watson, 2010, p. 22) that are destabilised by the climate crisis. Water metaphors and watery thinking is one way to explore these spatial reorientations, as we may consider life narrative as moving towards a more “wet ontology”, which takes “space, time, and motion” as its key nodes of engagement (Steinberg & Peters, 2015, p. 249). A “wet ontology”, according to Steinberg and Peters (2015), “can reinvigorate, redirect, and reshape debates that are all too often restricted by terrestrial limits” (p. 1) and to recognise that “our world is an ocean world” (Langewieche, 2001, p. 1) as “in a world conceptualised as open, immanent, and ever-becoming, scholars have turned away from notions of fixity towards fluidity and flow” (Steinberg & Peters, 2015, p. 1). Eco-autobiographical writing is a space to explore such fluid poetics to reflect on the conceptual, sociocultural and ecological factors that contribute to the climate crisis. Environments, like the self, are shifting and transient places – applying Blue Humanities thinking to fluid notions of self and environment invites other ontologies to be represented in life narrative. Given the instability of terrains within the context of the climate crisis, eco-autobiographical writing should aim to reflect a changing, shifting and tensile world.

In the next section, applying an eco-autobiographical, “meshy”, and fluid lens to Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *Braiding sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge and the teachings of plants* (2015) I explore the interplay between human and non-human climate hi/stories, the link between environment and affect, and consider how this kind of thinking can represent shifting relationships with environments that reflect reciprocity, responsibility and regeneration. If, as Squier (2004), claims, genre “regulates and it brings into being ... shapes how we can enter and engage in a preexisting social practice, and ... constitutes that social

practice, giving us ways of understanding it, as well as the conventions that make such practice possible” (p. 262), then eco-autobiographies might forge new pathways of understanding our bodies, environments and selves in the context of climate crisis. Badia et al. (2021) writes that, “Climate realism names the cultural challenge of representing and conceptualising climate in the era of climate crisis. ...with every weather event, we have become acutely aware that the forces indexed by climate are as much social, cultural, and economic as they are environmental, natural, and physical” (p. 14). A stronger sense of “climate realism”, according to Badia et al. (2021), “begins with the understanding that the entwined cultural, biological, and material feedback loops that mediate ecologies in the Anthropocene are informed by the formal parameters of how climate is known” (p. 14). I argue that eco-autobiography is one such formal parameter through which climate comes to be known, a formal parameter that can address the challenge of climate realism through literary aesthetics and strategies of narration. Life writing, as a “formal strategy of representation” puts climate to work as “cultural content” (Badia et al., 2021, p. 14). In doing so climate comes to be known through this text in two key ways: through strategies such as personification, the texts position the environment as a sentient being with its own agency and memory, a being the reader comes to know through the narrators' engagement with the land. And two, through exploring enmeshment between self and environment, the text emphasises both the *affective* qualities of the environments, and the *embodied* experiences of the narrator.

An Eco-Autobiographical Reading of *Braiding sweetgrass* (2015)

In the critically acclaimed collection of interconnected personal essays, *Braiding sweetgrass* (2015), Kimmerer, a botanist and member of the Potawatomi Nation, blends Indigenous wisdom with scientific knowledge while weaving the metaphor of sweetgrass throughout the collection to convey lessons of how humans can live in balance with the earth. Foregrounding her personal relationship to each environmental setting shaped by her identity as both scientist and mother, Kimmerer emphasises the notion of reciprocity, where the earth provides for us, and in return, we must care for the earth. This idea is reflected in how sweetgrass is harvested – gently and respectfully, only taking what is needed so that it can continue to thrive. Sweetgrass holds profound symbolic and cultural significance as a sacred plant in many Native American traditions, often used in ceremonies for its healing and purifying properties. The metaphor of braiding sweetgrass is persistent throughout the book, representative of the overall message that humans can play important roles in sustaining and nurturing environments, and that this should be seen as a gift exchange. The braid itself is representative of a mesh or entanglement, with three interconnected strands. In her memoir, *The cancer journals* (1980), Audre Lorde writes, “I do believe not until every woman traces her weave back strand by bloody self-referenced strand, will we begin to alter the whole pattern” (p. 78). Alaimo's (2010) interpretation of this statement is that in Lorde's poetic language, “the strands of the self can be understood as part of the weave of history, culture, economics, and power; tracing those strands constitutes an act of black feminist consciousness-raising” (Alaimo, 2010, p. 85) and that “the ‘bloody self-referenced’ strands testify that the self is corporeal, woven into a larger fabric of history, culture, and power” (Alaimo, 2010, p. 85). In *Braiding sweetgrass* (2015), this too is true, as Kimmerer's identity is deeply embedded in her Indigenous ancestry and

relationship to her environment, in her knowledge of plant wisdom and the surrounding ecology, and in her role as mother and caregiver. Each essay is an act of braiding these three strands together, as she connects and enmeshes these aspects of her identity.

Two essays in particular demonstrate notions of reciprocity, enmeshment and fluidity of body and environment. *The council of pecans* and *A mother's work*, explore themes of motherhood, care, community, networked knowledge and interconnected systems. In essays such as *Water lilies* and *A mother's work*, Kimmerer demonstrates “thinking with water” (Oppermann, 2023) as similar to strands that flow into one another and become one entity; the body, the environment and waterways can all be read as components of one continuous flow. She writes, “The outlet for my pond runs downhill to my good neighbours pond. What I do here matters. Everybody lives downstream ... the water connects us all” (Kimmerer, 2015, p. 97). This perspective defines Kimmerer’s relationship with environments and others, and represents how water metaphors can be employed in eco-autobiographical writing to explore interconnectedness and fluidity and “ecological thinking”. While Kimmerer is referring specifically to her own pond and her neighbour's pond, the metaphor extends to all life forms on earth, each pond, or life, runs into the next, and therefore, what happens to one body of water can nourish, or infect, all others. Opperman (2021) notes that historically, narratives of water are mostly from drawn from “customary western discursive maps that usually harbour a colonialist mindset ... but over the years the blue humanities has become more attentive to knowledges and narratives of non-western water cultures, thus enabling the configuration of a more capacious understanding of the role of global capitalism behind the decline of oceanic and/or hydrological systems” (p 3). The essays in Kimmerer’s *Braiding sweetgrass* (2015) contribute to the expanding body of narratives about non-western water cultures, as she writes: “Among our Potawami people, women are the Keepers of Water ... Being a good mother includes the caretaking of water” (Kimmerer, 2015, p. 94). As Opperman notes, “blue humanities scholars challenge the old paradigms of water ecologies in a way similar to how feminist and postcolonial scholars and ecocritics who have subverted hegemonic discourses that foregrounded (overtly or covertly) sexism, racism, speciesism, militarism, extractivism, and, above all, anthropocentrism, all rooted in a defunct geopolitical order perpetuating our “chronically exploitative relationships” (Estok, 2021, p. 438) with the more-than-human environments” (p. 9). Kimmerer returns to water as a symbol of caretaking and sustenance, and a means of connection – culturally, spatially and temporally. Reading this text through an eco-autobiographical and blue humanities lens illuminates how thinking with water can provide new perspectives and relationships to environments that subvert dominant colonial narratives that position waterways as resources, rather than rich reserves to respect and care for.

Braiding sweetgrass (2015) is an exemplary eco-autobiographical narrative for several reasons. The text navigates the complex entanglements of self, environment, bodies, and atmospheres by foregrounding the environment as an integral component of autobiographical identity, rather than a backdrop to life experience. The text establishes from the outset an intrinsic connection between narrative and place, and introduces the environment as a central character in the life story. In doing so, it reflects what Haraway (2016) describes as “symplogenesis” or “making-with”, where the creation of art or narrative is a collaborative process with the environment,

rendering narratives of self and identity as inextricable from the environments that sustain the bodies and voices that produce them. In the essays in *Braiding sweetgrass* (2015), environmental crisis is a key narrative element that blends personal and ecological storylines into a cohesive whole. The affective dimensions of environments shape Kimmerer’s expression of identity. The collision between affect and environment in the text demonstrates how landscapes and atmospheres are not merely physical spaces, but embedded with emotional and psychological significance. This interconnectedness reflects the concept of “wet ontologies”, where the boundaries between selfhood and the land dissolve, and the degradation of the environment becomes synonymous with the erosion of identity. For Kimmerer, the integration of self and environment extends to a critique of knowledge hierarchies, where colonial and Western epistemologies dominate and marginalise Indigenous knowledge systems. The integration of Indigenous wisdom and plant knowledge in *Braiding sweetgrass* (2015) challenges existing structures of Western, colonial perspectives and invites a rethinking of how we might create space for alternative ways of knowing and storytelling.

Braiding sweetgrass (2015) uses the meshiness of the eco-autobiographical mode to capture climate’s capacity to express embedded histories, which incorporate Indigenous histories, geological processes, and environmental destruction, and attempts to map pathways towards reciprocity, regeneration and responsibility. Reading this text through the meshy, fluid lens of eco-autobiography highlights the importance of interdependence between species and environments, and meshy, fluid thinking in the formation of identities. Deepening our understanding of how climate comes to be known in this way, and how affect and environment are intertwined in eco-autobiography, might be a starting point to imagine new relationships to environments based on reciprocity, responsibility and regeneration in life narrative.

Using environmental personhood to displace the centrality of the human

In *Braiding sweetgrass* (2015), the environment is personified to demonstrate the landscape as living, breathing, and responding, and that *personhood* is not necessarily exclusive to humans. In recent years, “environmental personhood” has emerged as a legal concept stemming from a 1972 essay by law professor Christopher Stone titled, “Should trees have standing? – Toward legal rights for natural objects”. Stone writes,

throughout legal history, each successive extension of rights to some new entity has been a bit unthinkable. Until the rightless thing receives its rights, we cannot see it as anything but a thing for the use of ‘us’ – those who are holding rights at the time. (1972, p. 450)

In September 2024, “mass destruction of nature” reached the International Criminal Court (ICC) as Pacific Island states proposed recognition of “ecocide” as an international crime. In 2008, Ecuador was the first country to enshrine the laws of nature in its constitution, and this growing movement allows ecosystems to become separate entities with their own agency, for example, in the Whangunai River and the Yarra River in Melbourne have both been awarded legal rights (with an appointed guardian). The idea that environments can have their own personhood is embedded in many Indigenous worldviews that do not centre the human as

superior to nature. According to research on the rights-of-nature movement, overwhelming, in legal cases, Indigenous communities act in the role of legal guardians. In the same way that being granted personhood can help to legally protect ecosystems, perhaps assigning personhood in life narrative can help to reshape cultural perceptions of environments not as separate to humans, but as sentient, valuable in their own right, and worthy of protection and respect. This invites provocative questions around agency in life narrative when the eco-autobiographer acknowledges the environment as a character in the life story, who can tell such life stories, and how. The notion of prescribing personhood to environments is gaining significant international interest, and is represented in eco-autobiographical narratives. Although the term *personify* itself seems human-centric, it should be noted that *person* is not specifically exclusive to humans. While existing definitions do prescribe “person” as “a human being/individual” (Def. 1, Merriam Webster Dictionary), alternative definitions could be applicable to environments in life narrative—for example, person can be defined as “a character or part in or as if in a play” (Def. 2, Merriam Webster Dictionary), “one (such as a human being, a partnership, or a corporation) that is recognized by law as the subject of rights and duties” (Def. 6, Merriam Webster), and a “reference of a segment of discourse to the speaker, to one spoken to, or to one spoken of as indicated by means of certain pronouns or in many languages by verb inflection” (Def. 7, Merriam Webster Dictionary). Within the essays in *Braiding sweetgrass* (2015), environments are recognised as a character, and spoken to, spoken of, and indicated by pronouns. In one essay, Kimmerer shares an anecdote of how each morning, her father would feed his morning coffee grounds into the soil as a way of giving thanks to the land. This act is symbolic of Kimmerer’s relationship to her environment – one built on giving thanks and exchange. This is one way of recognising environments as a part of the mesh of life, rather than positioning environments below human experience in a hierarchy of sentience or personhood. Therefore, they should be afforded the same rights and protection to thrive and survive as all beings.

Kimmerer draws on her knowledge of botany and Indigenous wisdom to demonstrate how plants have their own knowledge systems and agency. In the following passage, Kimmerer explores the phenomena of “mast fruiting” in which Pecan trees in a country fruit at the same time, all at once, in large batches, before going dormant again. She explores the interconnectedness of this event – the pecans feed humans and squirrels, the fat squirrels feed foxes and hawks, and the whole ecosystem flourishes. This flow results in community benefit. Kimmerer introduces the concept of mast fruiting by describing a memory shared with her by her grandfather, who in the 1930s, while living in poverty, found a grove of pecan nuts and collected them to store for winter and feed his family. She writes:

The pecan groves give, and give again. Such communal generosity might seem incompatible with the process of evolution, which invokes the imperative of individual survival. But we make a grave error if we try to separate individual well-being from the health of the whole. The gift of abundance from pecans is also a gift to themselves. By satiating squirrels and people, the trees are ensuring their own survival. The genes that translate to mast fruiting flow on evolutionary currents into the next generations, while those that lack the ability to participate will be eaten and reach an evolutionary dead end. Just so, people who know how to read the land for nuts and carry them home to

safety will survive the February blizzards and pass on that behaviour to their progeny, not by genetic transmission but by cultural practice. (pp. 15–16)

Here, Kimmerer demonstrates how we can learn from plants how a communal rather than individualistic mindset results in the prosperity of all. When the trees fruit, they rely on dispersal by humans and squirrels to spread the nuts and the seeds further afield, and to ensure the survival of the species. Kimmerer demonstrates how this process is no way passive, rather it is a strategic and deliberate action undertaken not just by a single pecan tree, but by an entire community of pecan trees. The use of the words “give” and “generosity” imply that the pecan trees have a sense of compassion for other species, and that they have an innate knowledge that communal sharing benefits the whole. She juxtaposes this with the human ability to “read the land” for nuts, suggesting that the trees too might “read the land” for humans, and provide a crop of fruit to ensure the gene pool is continued. Using this example, Kimmerer is suggesting that trees too have their own cultural practices which they pass on through genetics, and that humans play an integral part in facilitating this natural selection process. Kimmerer challenges the individualistic mindset of “survival of the fittest” by highlighting how communal generosity and cooperation can lead to evolutionary success. This is only possible, however, if we can see trees as sentient beings capable, and worthy, of collaboration. In this way, by personifying the trees and suggesting that they have agency over the “gifts” they choose to give, Kimmerer is inviting a new way of thinking about relationships to trees, one in which we can consider each other as enmeshed in the same ecosystem, rather than as separate communities divided by different social and political systems. If we pay attention to the way that trees communicate and provide, we might then be able to consider ourselves as part of the same community.

In the essay “A mother’s work”, Kimmerer documents her attempts to make the pond on her land “swimmable” (by human standards). In this way, she believes she might be able to prolong her children’s dependence and youth, and therefore her own motherhood. At the beginning of Kimmerer’s project, the pond is approached as something Kimmerer can clear and own, and to modify for human benefit, but over the course of the attempts to make the pond swimmable, Kimmerer becomes deeply entrenched in the pond’s ecosystem and develops what could be considered a “relationship” with the pond. She writes:

The pond built my muscles, wove my baskets, mulched my garden, made my tea, and relished my morning glories. Our lives became entwined in ways both material and spiritual. It’s been a balanced exchange: I worked on the pond, and the pond worked on me, and together we made a good home. (p. 94)

Over the years, Kimmerer grows to accept that the pond will never be swimmable to a human standard, but ducks, geese, insects and aquatic plants flourish in the environment. She manages to make a patch of the pond more hospitable for the human body, but the remainder of the pond resists her attempts at unwilding it. Ultimately, Kimmerer finds that working *with* the pond teaches her more about herself and the land than in keeping her children close to home. This is another example of how one might “collaborate” with the environment, and how environments

are “formed and forming” (Pryor). The choice of wording – “the pond built my muscles, wove my baskets, mulched my garden, made my tea, and relished my morning glories” ascribes credit to the pond, rather than to Kimmerer herself, thereby recognising the pond’s active role in forming both her body and her home. Rather than framing the pond as a passive object or backdrop to a scene where Kimmerer achieved these things completely by herself, she is acknowledging that these things could not be achieved without the contribution of the pond – which provides the resistance to her muscles, the reeds for her baskets, the mulch to nourish the garden, and the water for her flowers. Kimmerer acknowledges how throughout this process, the pond and her life become “entwined” both materially and spiritually. This focus on “exchange” is key in Kimmerer’s eco-autobiography, which recognises that environments are active participants in narratives, rather than backdrops for writers to arrange at will. Kimmerer notes “together we made a good home” (p. 94), as without the pond, the home could not exist. This is reflective of Koncharr Farr and Synder’s (1993) description of eco-autobiography: “it is impossible to tell where the Self ends and Nature begins or where Nature ends and the Self begins: ego and eco are inextricably intertwined” (p. 203). In this passage, the “ego” blends with the eco as Kimmerer entwines her narrative with the pond’s. By enmeshing her life narrative with the pond’s narrative, Kimmerer gives it a sense of personhood that implies the pond has its own desire to thrive beyond human needs, that the pond shares the home, and should be respected as its own entity.

Affect and embodiment as parts of the mesh

Environments too can form perceptions of self through affective intersections. Bladow and Ladino (2018) write that “while affect theorists have tended to prioritise affect within and in relation to bodies and to overlook the environment’s role in shaping it, ecocritics have too often neglected the affectivity of human bodies in their eagerness to champion greater attention to the more-than-human world” (p. 18). Writers of eco-autobiography, such as Kimmerer, demonstrate such an eagerness through their focus on embodied interactions with environments, foregrounding them as important and formative moments in their lives, rather than an insignificant and meaningless exchange. Throughout *Braiding sweetgrass*, Kimmerer relates to her environment through embodied interactions with place. In *A mother’s work*, she writes:

Having become so intimate with muck and tadpoles, I don’t mind the occasional strand that wraps around my arm, but the beach makes a small ramp that lets me wade in and plunge into the deep clear pool at the centre without raising a cloud. On a hot day it feels wonderful to submerge in the icy spring water and watch the pollywogs flee. Emerging with a shiver, I have to pluck bits of algae from my wet skin. (Kimmerer, 2015, p. 96)

These sensory descriptions – “wraps around my arm”, “icy spring water”, “emerging with a shiver”, “my wet skin” – echo Mentz’s (2024) claim that, “The changes in planetary water emerging from climate instability are not best represented by polar bears or the threatened Thwaites Glacier in Antarctica. Water-changes appear intimately and tangibly. We feel them on our skin” (p. 7). The strand wrapped around Kimmerer’s arm is a literal embodiment of

Ahmed’s (2004) description of how affect can “stick” to objects and bodies. In an ecological context, this demonstrates how human bodies are in no way exempt from the impacts of the climate crisis (and increasingly this has become evident in statistical data). Kimmerer comes to know her environment through the act of submerging her body in the cold water, and becoming literally entangled with the world of the pond. In becoming “intimate” with muck and tadpoles, Kimmerer has crossed and blurred the boundary that implies a separation between her body and her environment. Immersing herself in the water represents how she has immersed herself in the ecosystem of the pond through her daily, affective engagements with it. In this way, eco and ego have become intertwined. Through this process, she comes to care not only for her children and their desires to swim in clear water, but expands her “circle of care” to encompass the pond’s waters and all other waterways that it connects to. At the same time, the pond has conceded “letting” Kimmerer wade in “without raising a cloud”. This embodied exchange with the pond has resulted in fostering a deep sense of kinship and stewardship and a fluid thinking as Kimmerer realises that all waterways and all bodies are interconnected. The body is represented as its own waterway, with flowing tears. This reflects her enmeshment with her environment, which has only become clear to her through this everyday physical and material sensation. She writes:

The circle of care grows larger and caregiving for my little pond becomes caregiving for other waters. The outlet for my pond runs downhill to my good neighbour’s pond. What I do here matters. Everybody lives downstream. My ponds drains to the brook, to the creek, to a great and needful lake. The water connects us all. I have shed tears into that flow when I thought that motherhood would end. But the pond has shown me that being a good mother doesn't end with creating a home where just my children can flourish. A good mother grows into a richly eutrophic old woman, knowing that her work doesn't end until she creates a home where all of life’s beings can flourish. There are grandchildren to nurture, and frog children, nestlings, goslings, seedlings, and spores, and I still want to be a good mother. (Kimmerer, 2015, p. 97)

In this passage, affect and environment are intricately intertwined through the act of caregiving, which extends from Kimmerer’s personal emotional experiences to her external world. She writes that she has “shed tears into that flow” expressing that her bodily fluids literally become a part of the water. The emotional bond with the pond illustrates how deeply personal feelings of motherhood and carework are connected to the ecological system. The water, which “connects us all”, symbolises not only physical interconnectedness but also emotional and ethical ties to other living beings and ecosystems. In this way, Kimmerer’s understanding of motherhood evolves from a narrow focus on her own children to an expansive form of care that encompasses “frog children, nestlings, goslings, seedlings, and spores”. This broadening of care mirrors an environmental ethic where the boundaries of love and responsibility extend beyond human life to all of nature. The metaphor of a “richly eutrophic old woman” implies that a body too is rich in nutrients. The term eutrophic is provocative, as while eutrophic means an abundance of nutrients, it can lead to a growth in plants that leads to oxygen suffocation, killing other aquatic life. Perhaps what Kimmerer is implying is that humans are rich in resources that when kept to oneself, is suffocating to the wider environment, but when redistributed, it can benefit the wider community. Eutrophic in this way can be a contradiction,

and represents human engagements with environments, which have the potential to either be nourishing or harmful. This suggests that we all have eutrophic qualities. Kimmerer’s emotional desire to “be a good mother” drives her transformation, showing how affective experiences, such as nurturing and caregiving, are inextricably linked to environmental stewardship. The passage highlights that caring for the environment is an extension of personal emotional care, where the well-being of natural systems becomes intertwined with the emotional fulfilment of nurturing life in all its forms, or else risk suffocation. It is through the affective exchange with the pond that Kimmerer realises that a human body and a body of water share tissues, and therefore might share life stories.

Conclusion

In conclusion, eco-autobiographical texts offer a place for writers to explore complex, entangled relationships with environments and might act as a starting point for life writers to explore more expansive narratives. Techniques such as personification of environments is one way to pave new pathways for collaborating with environments, and seeing them as entities worthy of rights, protection and their own story. The exploration of affect, embodiment and environment in eco-autobiography is one way to integrate narratives beyond the human, and can be employed by drawing from spatial metaphors in ecocriticism such as Morton’s “mesh” and fluidity in *Blue Humanities*. Applying a fluid thinking in eco-autobiographical writing is one way of acknowledging that humans are a part of the mesh, and begins to deconstruct the centrality of the human in life narratives.

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