

Imagination and the Eco-social Crisis (or: Why I Write Creative Non-fiction)

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Abstract

Green Matters reflects on the 'unique cultural function' of literary texts with regard to environmental and ecological concerns. Another way of putting this is to ask: what do literary texts enable us to say or do in relation to the eco-social crisis that is not so readily expressed in other forms of discourse? I'd like to explore this question with regard to my own practice. After some years of writing fairly conventional journal articles and conference papers about literature and ecology, I now find myself among those practitioners in the Environmental Humanities who have been prompted by the urgency of the present crisis to reconsider the modes of our academic expression. This means that I wish to extend the reach of my writing beyond the limited readership of traditional academic discourse, and to admit such radical modes of knowing as may only be expressed through literature. I have found that a potentially inspiring and versatile medium for this is the genre of what is now being called creative nonfiction, in which extensive research may be made available to a general audience through the imaginative strategies of literary prose. In this chapter, I hope to reflect critically on some of my recent experiments in this mode: negotiating between the narrative approaches of memoir and the prose styles of the literary essay in an attempt to unsettle binary or absolutist thinking, and to reveal in its place inextricability and ecological interconnectedness. Working as it does against an instrumentalist or purely content-based view of knowledge production, this genre-bending, interdisciplinary way of writing tends to be, as one colleague put it to me, 'more difficult, but more fun' than traditional modes of academic discourse. Among other things, it considers stylistic choices to be a significant vehicle of meaning, offers a standpoint for situated truth claims while making ample room for ambiguity and ambivalence, and places trust in the imagination as a way of knowing.

As contributors to *Green Matters*, we all share a deep concern about the state of the earth. We experience terror in the face of climate change. We feel outrage at the ruthlessness of those agents of corporate globalization that seek

short-term gain at the expense of the living planet and all beings. And there is an immense sense of grief at the world our children will inherit. So we would like our academic practice to engage meaningfully with this local-global predicament, and we believe (or hope) that 'the literary' has something particular to offer, that literary texts may enable us to say or do things in relation to the eco-social crisis that are not so readily expressed in other forms of discourse. So much, then, we have in common.

Where I think my particular response may differ is that I'm also interested in the potential of a literary discourse for enlivening our own practice as academics in the Environmental Humanities: changing the way we ourselves write. My conviction is that the unprecedented times we find ourselves in require us to reconsider not only the priorities we bring to scholarship and teaching, but also the forms in which we write or convey knowledge. So the present urgency has led me to extend the reach of my writing beyond the limited readership of traditional academic discourse, and to experiment with such modes of knowing as may only be expressed through a more 'literary' language.

The question that arises from this in relation to the concerns of the present volume is: how may the genre of creative non-fiction (or literary non-fiction or narrative scholarship) work as a vehicle for academics in the Environmental Humanities? I'll be framing my response to this in the first person. In doing so, I'd like to claim some sort of legitimacy for the practices I describe, without presuming a prescription for anyone else.¹

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My response comes out of a specific place and a certain time. I live in Cape Town South Africa, but my privileged lifestyle locates me as a participant in the Global North. This North-South identity in microcosm is one that South Africa,

¹ About terminology: The term 'narrative scholarship', which has been useful to some ecocritics in recent years, intersects with my own practice to some extent, though (as I'll suggest) its implications seem more specific than what I have in mind. So in writing this chapter, I've moved back and forth between the terms 'creative non-fiction' and 'literary non-fiction', doing a search-and-replace that tries out one term and then the other. In the end, I've settled on 'creative non-fiction', because it has a certain currency, and because it seems pretentious to describe one's own work as 'literary'. However, it's not a term I feel very comfortable with, and sometimes in what follows, the context has suggested that 'literary' works better. I hope that as the field of academic writing becomes more open to imaginative elements, we'll find more words for our experiments.

with its infamous history, has enacted particularly brutally. Working in this region, I have spent several decades experimenting with writing and teaching forms of environmental literacy or ecocriticism, and now identify my work to some extent with what's being called the Environmental Humanities. Most recently as I write this in early 2018, a severe drought in the Western Cape, which threatens our city with the real possibility of running out of water within a few months, has made the local-global crisis of environment and development impossible to ignore.

In this context, certain priorities have come to the fore. The first is interdisciplinarity: once you start to think environmentally or ecologically, you begin crossing disciplinary boundaries, and your study of literature begins to learn from the myriad exigencies of plants, animals, waste, water, food, energy, bio-regions. A second priority is the attempt to write for a wider public: the urgency of the present crisis means that it's no longer appropriate for me simply to publish articles in academic journals that will only be read by a handful of other scholars. Implicit in this orientation is a focus on 'engaged' practice: the sense that my role in research and writing involves posing questions about some of the key issues of our time, issues that I call here eco-social. It's a term that takes us way beyond ideas of environmentalism as nature conservation, and evokes a sense of the inextricability of environmental and social justice.

This focus on exploring eco-social perspectives in an interdisciplinary way for a wider public involves certain choices regarding the content of the writing, as well as its form.

In terms of content, I seem to return again and again to certain key concerns. (1) Firstly, place(s): the study of place has become a large and somewhat contested field, beloved of ecocriticism and critiqued at times by more postcolonial perspectives. What interests me more specifically is the challenge posed by Rob Nixon's analysis of the potential parochialism of a place-centered emphasis: "Our intellectual challenge surely is how to draw on the strengths of bioregionalism without succumbing to what one might call eco-parochialism" (2011: 242). My aim here is to explore how place(s) may be represented in ways that reveal rather than obscure their immersion in global flows. (2) Secondly, interconnectedness: place teaches interconnectedness. The insight that 'everything is connected to everything else' may be either as facile-sounding as this bumper-sticker slogan, or as refined as the Madhyamika Buddhist account of emptiness-dependent arising. Either way, it's crucial. In its recurrent focus on interconnectedness, my work has been quite strongly influenced by a secular interpretation of some of the strategies of Buddhist philosophy. (3) Then, inevitably, the critique of hierarchic dualism: interconnectedness reveals that, as

one student put it to me, 'there *are* no others'. The recognition that the 'othering' of human beings articulates along the same fault-lines as the exploitation and denigration of nonhuman animals and ecosystems is one of the staples of environmental thinking. In my own work, then, I aim to foreground this while negotiating ways around habitual dualistic thinking. Coming from South Africa, the most direct way of seeing the problem (and this makes it very clear to students) is to describe it as apartheid-thinking. (4) Fourthly, the postmodern (non)self: the companion of dependent arising and the critique of dualism and essentialism is the insight that the self is not a 'thing', not a discrete or permanent entity, that it's infused with, and inextricable from, everything else. (5) Leading from this, an emphasis on situated knowledge: if all truth claims are contingent, how do you take a stand if you wish to contribute to a more just eco-social order? Since Donna Haraway's article from the early 1990s, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective' (1991), the idea of situated knowledge has been a key tool for engaged practitioners in making assertions that are 'true' not as absolute positions, but in their specificity. (6) Finally, in my experience, an eco-social orientation towards academic practice is likely to value kindness, even compassion. It may seem touchy-feely or peculiar to ask that one's scholarship and writing invoke or embody kindness, but this is what may well follow if our practice aims to respond sensitively to the unprecedented dilemmas of our time. In Buddhism, the insight into emptiness-interconnectedness is useless without compassion.

In all this, the key focus which animates all the others is interconnectedness. I'll put it very directly: interconnectedness is the core teaching of the Anthropocene.

What are the implications of such an orientation in terms of the way we write? Like certain others working in the widely-defined territory of ecocriticism, I've come to find that the received forms of 'standard academic discourse' simply don't accommodate my attempts to represent an engaged, interconnected, eco-social view, and that I need to experiment with other ways of writing. Of course, what we tend to call, rather vaguely, 'academic discourse' is certainly more complex and elusive as a form, and potentially more various, than it might at first appear. But the way I've learnt to write for scholarly journals (and which I try to teach my students) does have certain features. I'm thinking here in particular of writing in the Humanities, but even more specifically in literary studies.

Here are some of the key elements that characterize such writing, in my experience. (1) Discipline: academic writing involves verifiable research, correctness of assertions, knowledge of the field, and it is rigorous in its approach.

(2) Reason: the rational is elevated over emotion (or the senses, or the imagination), as the primary way of knowing, both for the writer and for the reader.² (3) Analysis: the primary mode of investigation is the analytic, with critique and argument as its key expressions. It tends to use evidence to draw certain conclusions, and often (we have to admit) massages this material in order to reach a clear assertion or thesis. (4) The critic: in literary studies, this emphasis on reason and the analytic not only foregrounds the role of the critic over the practitioner and gives little place for appreciation, but also (implicitly) tends to elevate the value of criticism and theory over creative practice. (5) Jargon: to a greater or lesser extent, the academic text relies on familiarity with specialized terminology. (6) A power tool: such modes of writing tend to have a high currency in the academic power-knowledge economy. Quite literally. In South Africa, academics' research budget is directly linked to the number of articles in this genre that we publish in accredited journals. (7) Exclusion: academic publications tend to be exclusionary in terms of audience.

This list describes a currently hegemonic model of research publication which involves a way of organising knowledge that derives from the Sciences and the Social Sciences. But for ourselves in the Humanities, it need not be the only option. Nobody would expect a cutting-edge paper on stem-cell research to be written for the general reader, but it *is* possible for us in literary and cultural studies to draw on a broader range of styles and voices, and to reach a wider audience. In the Humanities, then, there is the opportunity for our writing to be more *humane*. And by this I don't mean anthropocentric. In South Africa, the term 'humanity' is often translated in terms of the Nguni term *Ubuntu*, a word which figures personhood in relation to other persons: 'a person is a person because of other people', as they say. In an *Environmental Humanities* then, it is possible to reframe this insight to recognise the myriad persons who may be nonhuman. And that could include rivers and ecosystems, as well as animals.³

2 Reflecting on a range of 'alternative' forms of presentation of their research by academics across a range of disciplines, the authors of *Engaged Writers, Dynamic Disciplines* find that the three key elements of academic writing are "1) Clear evidence in writing that the writer(s) have been persistent, open-minded, and disciplined in study. [...] 2) The dominance of reason over emotion or sensual perception. [...] 3) An imagined reader who is coolly rational, reading for information, and intending to formulate a reasoned response" (Thaiss and Zawacki 2006: 5–7).

3 Recent international developments in environmental law are extending a version of personhood to rivers and ecosystems as well as animals. A strong influence in this has been the work of the pioneering South African environmental lawyer Cormac Cullinan, whose *Wild Law* (2002) laid out some of the key priorities.

There are many varied possibilities for transforming the way we write, some of them very adventurous and inspiring. In particular, initiatives to open up academic writing in the Humanities to include personal narrative have been very productive, across many disciplines.⁴

As regards literary studies, and ecocriticism specifically, the pioneering ecocritic Scott Slovic has for several decades engaged with the idea and practice of narrative scholarship (he coined the term in 1994) as a vehicle for, as he puts it, ‘viscerally emphasizing the scholar’s sense of situatedness in a living, breathing world’ (2016: 317).⁵ Work in this genre tends to use personal, often anecdotal, narrative as a way of clarifying the scholarly argument: the critic explores the possibility of storytelling as one of the tools for literary analysis. And while many seminal ecocritical texts of recent years remain formally ‘academic’ in mode, the narrative approach does seem to have been particularly appropriate for ecocriticism. As Ian Marshall put it as early as 1998, “Narrative scholarship is a way of putting into practice the ecological principle of interconnectedness” in that it embodies a healthy awareness of our role “not just as observer but as participant, as part and parcel of the world” (1998: 8).

There is now quite a range of practitioners working in the field, and not only in the United States. An evocative example of Slovic’s own writing in the genre is his collection of essays *Going Away to Think: Engagement, Retreat, and Ecocritical Responsibility* (2008) which sensitively experiments with the relation between scholarly and literary writing, negotiating between the speaker’s experiences of text and of world. And from the UK, the ecocritic and poet Terry Gifford has written some marvellously nuanced essays that may be described

4 One of the more delightful (and successful) texts I’ve come across is *Aliceheimers: Alzheimer’s Through the Looking Glass*, where Dana Walrath combines creative writing, visual art, and her scholarship in medical anthropology to produce a graphic novel which presents a very imaginative analysis of her own mother’s condition. Her aim in bringing her academic research into conversation with personal experience and creative practice in this way is to use image, narrative, and lyricism to critique the dominant biomedical story of dementia, and to reframe dementia.

5 This phrase is from Slovic’s useful overview of the territory, ‘Narrative Scholarship as an American Contribution to Global Ecocriticism’, in Hubert Zapf’s *Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology* (2016). Slovic here locates this recent turn towards a more ‘autobiographical’ approach in relation to the tendency for a more ‘positioned’ stance in feminist and multicultural criticism since the 1970s and 1980s, and the recognition of the inevitable implicatedness of the observing self in anthropological writing.

in this category. For example in 'Five Modes of "Listening Deeply" to Pastoral Sounds' (2015), he offers a delightfully embodied (what he calls 'subjective existential') reflection on six months' preoccupation with pastoral sounds, in which literary analysis – simultaneously fine-grained in its attention and voluminous in range – is seemingly effortlessly situated in the context of the actual soundscape of his home neighbourhood, the village of Stoke St Michael in Somerset. And as regards discussion of narrative scholarship itself, Gifford's chapter 'Walking into Narrative Scholarship', discusses the practice of this genre of eco-critical writing and the practice of 'walking into a landscape' (2010: 106).

What I'm describing in what follows has much in common with this recent turn towards narrative scholarship, but it also hopes to take things a little further. I believe that the urgency of the present time gives us permission to recognize our capacity to be writers as well as scholars. So yes, let us make use of storytelling as a vehicle, but let us also find other ways of making our own academic research more compelling and accessible, drawing on what we know about the marvelous potential (imaginative, persuasive, transformative) of the literary texts we study. That said, what I'm proposing is quite humble and specific in its aspirations, namely that we in the Environmental Humanities experiment more widely with writing *essays*. If the insight into interconnectedness (our unreturnable gift from the Anthropocene) is at the heart of what one wishes to explore, then the literary essay really is a productive genre, also known as creative non-fiction, literary non-fiction.

Creative non-fiction, then. In my sense of it, the term designates a place where meticulous research, personal reflection, high quality prose, and imaginative fictions can meet. Our ancestor in the form is Montaigne, but you don't have to look far in the contemporary literary world to find that this is a genre that engages the urgencies of our time particularly well. Some of the most compelling writing about human beings' interrelations with the nonhuman is happening in literary essays. Think of Rebecca Solnit, Arundhati Roy, or Robert Macfarlane. Or, from the previous generation, Gary Snyder or Barry Lopez. In South Africa, there has also been an important emphasis on non-fiction among our strongest writers, particularly post-apartheid. Among many, Jonny Steinberg, Antjie Krog, and Njabulo Ndebele are particularly significant practitioners.⁶ But this is literary *practice*. What about literary *studies*? What are the possibilities and constraints of creative non-fiction as a genre for scholars like ourselves in the Environmental Humanities? And more specifically: how might it help us to explicate and represent interconnectedness?

6 For a discussion of this in particular, see Brown and Krog (2011), Twidle (2012), and Nixon (2012).

Two of our most wonderful international writers, W.G. Sebald and Amitav Ghosh, have published literary criticism in the form of highly crafted essays that seek to evoke an interconnected world. In his professional role as literary studies academic, Sebald wrote limpid discussions of writers and artists that “trace a path between critical essay, life writing, and creative writing” (2014: xv). In these pieces, the rhythms of the prose are as sensitively crafted as they are in his more well-known works of non-fiction, so that the author’s act of critical reading is at once an act of creative practice. And in his recent book, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2017), Amitav Ghosh gives an incisive and at once narratively compelling account of the crisis of the Anthropocene, and examines why the contemporary novel seems (in general) to be paralyzed in responding to it.

From South Africa, Rob Nixon (who is at once local-born and transnational, now living in the US) and Hedley Twidle are two writer-critics who are both active in developing the Environmental Humanities as a field of study, while their own writing also experiments with the sort of genre-bending border-crossing I have in mind. Nixon’s influential concept of slow violence, and his associated exploration of the environmentalism of the poor in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), has made a key contribution to the way the academy understands eco-social priorities. But he also publishes numerous essays in the public domain that extend the role of the Humanities academic to that of the engaged intellectual. In such work, his observation about the recent prevalence of literary non-fiction in South Africa and the US might as well apply to his own practice. He writes: “I am drawn to the infinitely varied, riddled, unsteady realities that non-fictional forms advance” (Nixon 2012: 29). Another home-boy in this field is Hedley Twidle. His work is so far less internationally recognized, but his recent collection of essays, *Firepool: Experiences in an Abnormal World* (2017), offers a series of innovative and playful explorations of the eco-social through the medium of the literary essay, which embodies another very lively example for the literary and cultural studies academic. Again, Twidle’s account of contemporary non-fiction from South Africa is suggestive in relation to his own writing. He has described the genre as a “productive clustering of fiction, life-writing, microhistory and journalism” (2012: 24) which asks us to read the literary in contemporary SA in a way that “plays across different genres and modes of address rather than remaining trapped within [...] an endless series of tired oppositions: ‘the novel’ versus ‘history’; ‘aesthetics’ versus ‘raw experience’; ‘committed’ versus ‘formalist’” (2012: 24).⁷

7 Since this essay was originally written, Twidle has published *Experiments with Truth: Narrative Nonfiction and the Coming of Democracy in South Africa* (2019).

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To what extent might such examples suggest possibilities for our own writing in the Environmental Humanities? What might a more ‘creative’ or ‘literary’ approach – writing essays, rather than articles – enable one to do or say that is not so readily expressed in more standard academic discourse? And how far can you take this: what elements need to be retained, if the text is to remain in some sense ‘academic’? I’ll draw on my own experience to make some suggestions.

Much of the work I’m doing these days involves close textual analysis, but it is also interdisciplinary and narrative. For example, *A Millimetre of Dust: Visiting Ancestral Sites* (2008) involves research into archaeological sites which is framed as a travel memoir, and *The Blackridge House: A Memoir* (2019) uses a narrative about my mother’s dementia and a quest for her childhood home to present an eco-social history of the region where she lived. To call this writing ‘creative non-fiction’ suggests a conversation between historical fact and imagination, the (radical?) sense that the imagination is also a way of knowing, and the recognition that at some level you’re making it up. So it’s tricky territory! In preparing this chapter (which is, ironically, more of an article than an essay), and trying to identify some priorities from my own experiments, I have come up with seven which I’ll call here: accuracy, speculation, openness, style, subjectivity, feelings, and audience.

(1) Accuracy. The key criteria of rigour, discipline, and meticulous research for academic writing apply equally to all credible non-fiction. Facts must be verifiable, and you need to acknowledge the work of other researchers in the field where appropriate. So while I might remodel certain details for the sake of the narrative (turn two visits to a place into one), I always make sure to read a lot of historical, literary, scientific, and archaeological material, and to record such information accurately, check back with my informants, reference all sources, and so on. However much we might love *Songlines*, nobody wants a new verb for bullshit to be coined after their own name, as in ‘to Chatwin’.

(2) Speculation. What you *do* with this research material (and its silences) is much of what makes the essay interesting. Along with the invaluable practice of theoretically informed ‘close reading’ which is the staple of our analysis, the ‘creative’ part of writing creative or literary non-fiction seems to involve being open to a more imaginative interpretation of the same material. As Nixon puts it, “[a]s a reader, I’m partial to generic edgelands where documentary forms and fictional strategies mingle and liaise. [...] episodes of speculative consciousness within non-fiction where the historical archive otherwise would deliver only silence” (Nixon 2012: 33).

So for example when – as part of the research for *A Millimetre of Dust* – I visited Wonderwerk Cave in the Northern Cape, and read all the site reports and papers that had been written about it, I was grateful when an archaeologist friend assured me that such sites don't 'belong' solely to archaeological discourse. This helped me feel that it was possible, even valuable, to reflect on the *significance* of the site as a literary practitioner, in ways that the scientific discourse of archaeology can't do. More specifically, in terms of eco-social thinking: I experienced seeing the traces of the ash hearth at the bottom of the pit at Wonderwerk as something quite extraordinary. The place is, after all, the oldest known human hearth. So in writing about the site, I allowed myself to represent it in a discourse that reflected the emotional impact of this experience, and also to make a speculative (or imaginative or reflective or contemplative) inference by which it became possible to describe the cave symbolically. From such a perspective, its significance is extraordinary: the very location of the fire that makes us human, the site of the beginning of burning. By allowing a 'nonscientific' language to evoke this, it was possible to highlight its powerful ambiguity as a place that is at once the first hearth, and the cave where our kind first lit the fires of carbon.

(3) Openness. While academic discourse uses argument and evidence to reach a decisive conclusion, or to promote a particular thesis, the creative imagination tends not to be much interested in final assertions. Instead, the literary non-fiction essay is more likely to be characterized by contradiction, ambivalence, ambiguity. Writing about South African author Jonny Steinberg's simultaneously highly researched and imaginatively sensitive (non-fiction) prose, Hedley Twidle comments that "the privilege of the literary is surely to remain naggingly unfinished, opening out into a world of human relations that extend beyond the reach of political science. This though, is not necessarily the preserve of the *novel*" (2012: 23). In other words, literary prose may well have these qualities, even when it's not fiction. Even, perhaps, when you're writing as an academic. I would add to this the suggestion that if the power of the literary text often lies in remaining 'open-ended', then even as an academic writer, if you want to really engage the reader, don't spell it all out, or tell them what to think or what to conclude. Instead of positioning the reader as a recipient of a completed argument, let them be an agent of knowledge. Give them something to do.⁸

8 Regarding what I'm calling here 'openness' versus authoritative assertions, I'm also reminded of the instructive debates held in South Africa during the 1980s around the question of to what extent artistic or literary cultural practice can function as 'a weapon of struggle'. In a paper that catalysed extensive debate, 'Preparing ourselves for freedom' (1990), Albie Sachs

(4) Style. For academics in literary studies, writing literary essays is an opportunity to use our already highly developed sensitivity to literary style to extend the possibilities of our writing beyond the habitual frames of critique and analysis that the academic article tends to prescribe. As W.G. Sebald illustrates by example, even when writing academic essays, the quality of the prose can itself be a vehicle of meaning. Such an emphasis is an invitation to experiment with the formal strategies of lively prose (rhythm, assonance, metaphor, imagery, narrative, dialogue, etc.), and so to find effective ways to 'show' as well as 'tell' (as we rather predictably and repetitively tend to say to our creative writing students). So in my own experiments, I'm continually trying out forms that might work to *represent* interconnectedness, rather than simply to discuss it. This often takes place through choices regarding metaphor and narrative structure.

Metaphor is, of course, about connections, often emotional ones, and it recognises the resonances between disparate areas of experience, without being too explicit. This makes it an obvious vehicle for representing eco-social interconnectedness. Here are three examples from my recent work on *The Blackridge House*. Firstly, the metaphor 'smashed' was useful as a way of suggesting links between my ageing mother's experience of dementia (she described herself as feeling 'like an egg that's been smashed'), the historian John Wright's comment to me on the devastating impact of imperialism in the region ('It's not just that something's been lost. It's that it's been broken. Smashed!'), and some actual shards of precolonial pottery that had been irretrievably shattered, and since picked up in the neighbourhood. Secondly, the idea of 'war' functions in the text both as a literal event (the entire recent history of the region can be tracked as a series of wars of occupation and conquest), and a metaphoric 'war against earth' (which is also a war against ourselves) in which the conquest of other humans is inevitably accompanied by the occupation of the land and the subjugation of other beings. And thirdly, 'seeds': in the narrative, the imperial dissemination of ideology is accompanied by the literal conveyance of seeds across the world.

Narrative structure is another key tool for writers of literary essays. Again, in *The Blackridge House*, instead of making use of a linear chronology, I've attempted to convey a sense of the interpenetration of 'past' and 'present' by constructing the narrative as a lattice of meaning, a non-linear *mesh* of stories that track back and forth between present and past, personal and ecological, gradually building up a composite picture of the eco-social history and

argued culture can't be a 'weapon' because it doesn't fire in one direction. Its special (and invaluable) quality is to be multi-valent, indeterminate, ambiguous.

geography of the region. My hope is to use this form to illustrate or *enact* an idea of interconnectedness through time and space: witnessing the recent history of KwaZulu-Natal through the lens of a particular family, and using the micro-environment of a particular neighbourhood to tell the story of a whole ecosystem.⁹

(5) Subjectivity. Although we really do know these days that the observer is always implicated in what is being observed, much academic writing in the Humanities still avoids using the personal pronoun, and students are commonly taught this as one of the basics for writing an essay. By contrast, creative non-fiction tends to claim the opportunity to say ‘I’, and writing an essay is a chance both to ‘situate’ knowledge spatially and temporally, and to write quite intimately from ‘inside a personal voice’.¹⁰ That said, the turn towards narrative scholarship and the possibilities of creative non-fiction (or CNF, as its practitioners may call it), also make possible forms of writing that, at their worst, embody a self-regarding narcissism which scarcely seems to perceive the speakers’ immersion in a living world, let alone working to deconstruct the ‘self’ or evoke interconnectedness. For any of us wishing to experiment in the genre, the discomfort such writing evokes is instructive, and it poses a strong challenge: how to interfuse the personal and the (eco)political, or to use personal narrative as a vehicle for reflection on what is beyond the ‘self’, the eco-social, for instance? Some models are present in recent non-fiction from South Africa, where the memoir form tends to open out into a broader reflection on the social. As Rob Nixon observes, in literature from this region, the memoir has taken a different trajectory from the very personal, inward direction it has largely followed in the United States. As he puts it, “South African non-fiction, whatever the theme, is more likely to address – directly or indirectly – the state of this much smaller nation” (2012: 36).

As regards my own work, I’ve been particularly aware of the potential pitfalls of saying ‘I’ in my recent book, with its focus on family stories. I’m not sure how well I’ve managed to convey this, but the remedy I’ve tried to apply is to

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- 9 In ‘Writing Tips: The Collected “Maxims” of W.G. Sebald’, his students David Lambert and Robert McGill have assembled a few wonderfully incisive remarks made by W.G. Sebald in the final fiction workshop he delivered at the University of East Anglia, in 2001. Some of this is very relevant to what I’m describing here. With regard to narrative structure, they quote him saying: “Physicists now say there is no such thing as time. Everything co-exists. Chronology is entirely artificial and essentially determined by emotion. Contiguity suggests layers of things, the past and present somehow coalescing or co-existing”.
- 10 The useful collection *Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Non-fiction* (2013) assembles a range of examples and reflections on the genre.

consider such stories with a keen eye for emptiness-dependent-arising (inter-connectedness). From such a view, the minute particulars of person and place become a lens for perceiving regional and global flows. So the traces of one grandmother's recipe collection track through the whole biosphere (the local-global foodways), and a single grandfather's letters from the South African War give an intimate view of the forces of imperialism that are the precursor of corporate globalization.

(6) Feelings: Once the imagination is admitted into our academic writing as a way of knowing, it claims a place for the reader's visceral, felt experience: emotions and the senses, the lyrical, the beautiful, the sublime, the possibility of wonder, play, joy, horror, fear, and an emphasis on 'heart' as well as 'mind'. As we know, it is just such modes of experience that the English Romantic poets (witnessing the first machinations of the industrializing civilization whose eco-social consequences we now inherit) brought to the fore. By taking the imagination seriously in this way, they catalyzed a radical protest tradition which stood as a witness against the destructive impacts of so-called progress, and continues into our own time in the activism of contemporary environmentalists. So it seems quite appropriate for eco-sensitive literary scholars to draw on a Romantic emphasis for inspiration in our own writing.

Is it possible then, to open the door a little wider to 'felt' experience in academic prose, and at what cost? Although literary studies texts have always been likely to subvert this binary, the dominance of the rational over emotion or sensual perception has been one of the key criteria for academic writing. How then to negotiate the (potentially disruptive) presence of other modes of knowing? I'll leave this as a question rather than suggest any easy answer, since it's really at the heart of what each practitioner needs to discover, each time. My conviction is that the urgency of the present crisis makes it worth trying.

(7) Audience. The decision to use a non-specialist language to write essays for a wider audience (the so-called 'general reader') turns the literary scholar into some version of the public intellectual. Such a role may seem daunting or uncomfortable, but again, in the unprecedented condition in which we and all Earth-beings now live, it's one that we need to attempt. At the same time, most academics (myself included) who write creative non-fiction also write more 'traditional' journal articles. That too is our freedom. Different contexts and intentions evoke different responses.

I'll end with a thought about questions, constraints, challenges. Experimenting with writing essays as a vehicle for academic research, finding an imaginative voice for eco-social literary studies, writing in a way that is more 'humane' ... This practice is really far more challenging, I've found, than

producing a critical journal article. First, there are challenges with regard to reception and recognition. Though some colleagues and journals do recognize creative non-fiction as a legitimate genre, many do not. And then, of course, the form itself is challenging: writing in this way involves a constant negotiation between the impulses of 'showing' and 'telling', between diverse registers and expectations, distinct voices and stances, and between the imperatives of reason and imagination.

So it certainly is not easy. Yet... this brings me back to that comment from my colleague, the literary scholar Duncan Brown, about his own writing in this genre-bending genre: that 'it's more difficult, but also more fun'. More recently he added, about writing in this way, 'It's what keeps me going'. I hope you'll make your own experiments.

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