

Editorial

Creative Writing and Arts Going Green in the EFL Classroom

Damiano Benvegnù
Dartmouth College
ecozona.arts@gmail.com

DOI: [HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.37536/ECOZONA.2021.12.1.4282](https://doi.org/10.37536/ECOZONA.2021.12.1.4282)



The Italian political philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) had a malformation of the spine that stunted his growth. In the town of Ghilarza, in Sardinia, where the young Gramsci went to school, there is a small museum which preserved the two stones carved into round weights that Antonio as a boy used for lifting exercises meant to strengthen his shoulders and thus straighten his back. In a famous 1998 open letter he wrote to *Subcomandante Marcos*, the British art critic John Berger transforms this little piece of Gramsci trivia into an invitation to become aware of how the environment subtends and informs one's political practices. Berger claims that those two stones were not simply dead weights, but rather Gramsci's companions, as for him they were the continuous and dialoguing reminder of Sardinia's stony landscape, of its accumulated histories and spaces (Berger 6-11). According to Berger, Gramsci was learning from the stones: he was learning how to live with them as well as how to think with them, absorbing the patience of stones necessary to resist the colonial education forced upon him by the Italian nation state.

In a sense, through his interaction with the stones, Gramsci was thus forming his own eco-political pedagogy, learning from them how to critically and dialectically deconstruct the connections between social conflicts and environmental devastation. This first encounter with the stones as teachers might have also prompted him to reflect upon education throughout his whole life, making several important remarks about the "role of the political party as an educator in civil society" as well as on the more general "lineaments of a democratic and equitable school policy" (Buttigieg 69-70). Crucially, at least for a multilingual nation as Italy, many of Gramsci's comments on education are connected to what he called "the question of language," i.e. the intersection of language, hegemony, and geographical sensibility.

This brief socio-polit(h)ic story about Gramsci, his stones, and his own linguistic and socio-environmental education effectively encapsulates the theme of this issue of *Ecozon@*, devoted to "Going Green in the EFL Classroom." Even though the study of the relationships between language learning and environmental awareness can be tracked back to Edward Sapir's 1912 "Language and Environment," a fuller conversation has only developed in the last few decades around what language(s) we can and should use to address environmental issues and environmental justice (cfr. Fill & Mühlhäusler, 107-

172). For instance, a 2012 article published in *English Teaching Forum* claims that language teachers are in a unique position to promote environmental awareness as they can provide students the opportunity not only to develop language skills, but also to become more informed citizens, both locally and globally (Hauschild, Poltavtchenko, and Stoller 2-13). Our two guest editors, Claudia Deetjen and Christian Ludwig, make a similar point in the introduction to this issue of our journal. They, too, remind us of the role played by education—and its key practical corollaries of curricular reforms and teacher training—in the global fight against climate change. Moreover, they identify “inter- and transcultural foreign language classrooms” as crucial “in promoting processes of environmental learning on a cognitive, emotional and behavioral level” (Deetjen & Ludwig, Introduction). This is the reason why scholars in the environmental humanities are becoming increasingly aware of trans-lingual and trans-cultural contacts as capable of creating transitional ecotones and therefore new patterns of socio-environmental resilience (cfr. Eppelsheimer, Küchler, & Melin).

The Creative Writing and Art section of this issue of *Ecozon@* is not the proper place for a sufficient conversation on ecopedagogy, ecolinguistics, and second language acquisition. However, even the contributions that follow engage on different levels with such critical intersections. As recently pointed out by Formato, when teachers combine language learning, art education and environmental education in one task, second-language acquisition classrooms can indeed become important spaces for ecopedagogical practices (Formato 1502). In fact, as his example of using Italian *Arte Povera* in an Italian language classroom testifies, visual works of art can “bring attention to the fragility of the natural world” and consequently have critical applications to the current climate crisis (1504). All the works that form our section have potential ecopedagogical applications as well, as they all engage with and explore multiple artistic media and languages as their ecocritical way to test cognitive and existential boundaries and thus promote environmental awareness. Either implicitly or explicitly, the artists presented here are like Gramsci in the sense that they are as much trying to live with their nonhuman artistic companions as thinking about how their work appeals to a larger educational purpose.

On the cover of this issue there is an image by Kit Turner, who is also the first contributor to our section. Turner, a freelance artist and designer raised both in England and Germany but currently based in Karlsruhe, is interested in the connection of both human individuals and societies to the nonhuman environment. His works vary from illustration, painting and photomanipulation to 3D designs, and attempt to delve into the very heart of the truth of nature and existence. As both the cover image and the other two works in this section display, Turner’s work plays with the boundary between artificial and natural, and thus compels viewers to investigate more deeply the reality of what they are seeing. Whether it is an object as visually commonplace—and part of the history of still life painting—as a vase with plants that digitally disintegrates in front of our eyes, or the puzzling geometric perfection of pieces of bark on the forest floor, these images suggest stories of hybrid and transmedia entanglements between humans and nonhumans, technology and the world.

A more spiritual approach to exploring and supporting nature conservation and awareness about environmental issues is what instead characterizes the work of Janet Botes. Botes is a performative artist, illustrator, designer and workshop facilitator based in South Africa. Per her artist statement, her work is often process-based, as it is “inspired by ecology, biodiversity, natural cycles and our place as a species within the web of life and the galactic community.” The selection of images Janet generously offered to our journal demonstrate not only a wide range of artistic languages—from detailed ink drawings to performative actions and explorations in urban, gallery and outdoor spaces—but also the ephemerality of some of her work, meant to both minimize the artist’s impact on the site and emphasize instead “the impermanence and flux of life, the cyclical nature of our physical world.” Given her activity as workshop facilitator, it is unsurprising that Botes’ art displays a specific pedagogical sensibility: in works such as “Contemplating a stone,” “Grab,” and “Licking a stone,” Botes both directly appears to learn from her dialogue with the land and educates us about our complementary physical and phenomenological connection to the nonhuman world.

The first literary contribution belongs instead to James Kelly, a writer and translator with a strong interest in landscape and time. As he writes in his own introduction, his contribution to *Ecozon@* consist of a series of poems and images inspired by a week spent in the province of Teruel, in the Spanish autonomous community of Aragon, for the 53rd Practical Geology Course run by the Summer University of Teruel. Written both in English and Spanish, and accompanied by photos of geological formations, these poems are haikus whose syllable structure seeks to mirror—according to the author—“the rigid geometry of crystals embedded in their matrix.” Even more remarkably, in their visual multi-presence, they offer a striking stimulus to consider the distance as well as the connection between languages, artistic media, and things; to live with their ability, or lack thereof, to be translated from one form into another; to experience their transcultural and more-than-human existence. As such they also invite readers to think of their language as some sort of geological formation, as if their words were also written “in strata / ages layered on ages,” being both very much part of the human world and belonging to a different nonhuman time.

Petra Kupperts is instead the author of “13 Tides”, a “prose-poetry exploration of human/non-human agencies, influences, and livelinesses, focused on an artificial mini-reef.” Kupperts is a disability culture activist and a community performance artist who also teaches at the University of Michigan, in the USA. As an artist and an educator, she has created several participatory community performance environments engaging with public space, tenderness, site-specific art, access and experimentation. “13 Tides” seems to mirror Kupperts’ interests as it represents the porous boundaries between health and illness, inside and outside, life and death, within a site-specific more-than-human community along a sea shore. As an ecosomatic exploration, this text engages with the parallel between different bodies and their respective places, the human called Samantha and the oyster both engaging with food and toxicity, strength and weakness, while acknowledging the entangled dialectics of embodiment and emplacement.

The last contribution is a poem written by Stuart Flynn and entitled “Boarding the Iceberg.” As many of the contributors to this section, even Flynn embodies a transnational movement of people, cultures, and languages: born in Australia, he currently lives in Dublin, Ireland. As some of the other contributions to this section, his poem is about encounters: in this case, an encounter between an allegedly human narrator and an iceberg, a few nonhuman creatures, and a different sense of time. There is a clear sense that the poetic subject learned from these encounters. As readers, we have an equivalent feeling that encountering this poem will teach us about drifting toward the Australian Antarctic Territory and a different sense of more-than-human community, both today and “twenty million years ago.”

Works Cited

- Berger, John. “How to Live with Stone.” In *Gramsci. Space, Nature, Politics*, edited by Ekers, Michael, & Al, Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.
- Buttigieg, Joseph. “On Gramsci.” *Daedalus*, vol. 131, no. 3, 2002, pp. 67-70.
- Eppelsheimer, Natalie, Uwe Kuchler and Melin, Charlotte. “Claiming the Language Ecotone: Translinguality, Resilience, and the Environmental Humanities.” *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities*, vol. 1, no. 3, 2014.
- Fill, Alwin and Peter Mühlhäusler. *The Ecolinguistics Reader: Language, Ecology, and Environment*. Continuum, 2001.
- Formato, Giuseppe. “Eco-justice Pedagogy All'Italiana: Radical Italian Art in the Italian-language Classroom.” *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, vol. 10, no. 12, pp. 1501-1509.
- Hauschild, Staci, Elena Poltavtchenko, and Fredricka Stoller. “Going Green: Merging Environmental Education and Language Instruction.” *English Teaching Forum*, no. 2, 2012, pp. 2-13.