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Narrative Environmental Ethics, Nature Writing, and Ecological Science as Tradition: Towards a Sponsoring Ground of Concern

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Over the last 30 years, environmental philosophers and ecological researchers have turned their attention to the possibilities of narratives: the stories people tell about their lives in conjunction with the human and non-human agents they live with. An interest in narrative environmental ethics reflects a re-evaluation of canonical ecophilosophical texts. Works such as Paul W. Taylor's *Respect for Nature* suggest an essentialist view of environmental ethics in which predetermined principles are imposed on places and situations. On the other hand, Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* combines first-person prose with science-based explanations of the "biotic pyramid" towards the development of a land ethic. Examples, such as Leopold's, of narrative ethics are thought to offer relational, place-based, non-authoritative, and non-anthropocentric models. This article examines three critical components of environmental narratives: self, context, and tradition. In order for environmental narratives to advance ecological ethics, they must be accompanied by the tradition of natural science (geology, ecology, and evolution) to provide the "sponsoring ground" for ethical concern and action. The role of natural science as a tradition—and indeed one of many—in narrative ethics provides the basis for ecological selfhood in the context of place. These assertions will be supported by an analysis of the environmental narratives of Karen Warren and Jim Cheney. However, in the temporally expansive and ecologically conscious poetic narratives of John Kinsella we find an environmental ethics deeply rooted in the material realities of place.

Keywords: narratives, ecopoetics, environmental ethics, ecological science

1. Introduction: Environmental Narratives, Ethics, and Ecopoetics

Over the last 30 years, environmental philosophers and ecological researchers have debated the potential of narratives for generating "relational ethics" (Ellis 2007), place-based ethics (Friskics 2003), and non-anthropocentric models of ecological intervention (see Cheney 1987; Warren 1993; Preston 2001; Robertson et al. 2001; Liszka 2003; Slicer 2003). Advocates argue that narrative models help to redress the limitations of ethical paradigms that impose moral principles *ex situ* upon places, peoples, and cultures. The imposition of moral principles constitutes what Scott Friskics calls a "preoccupation with establishing clearly defined boundaries which will circumscribe and delimit the territory of our ethical concern" (2003, 29). According to Friskics, some seminal works in environmental philosophy, such as Paul W. Taylor's *Respect for*

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Nature (1986), apply conceptual constructs to environmental experiences and situations. In contrast to predetermined frameworks, narrative ethics are thought to offer local, relational, and situational positions derived from the contexts which generated—or were generated by—the crises in the first place. For Friskics environmental narratives entail personal engagement with ecological issues and “speak of the sponsoring ground of my concern [and] define the context of my ethical deliberations” (2003, 11). A narrative ethics, therefore, is presumed to reflect more sensitively the personal and geographical milieus in which and for which deliberations occur. In this article, I ask, “can narrative serve as a basis for an appropriate environmental ethics?”. By “appropriate” I mean frameworks that support behavioral, social, and political paradigms that do not undergird the environment’s denigration. As a way of specifying how narrative approaches work, environmental writing—prose nature writing and ecopoetry—will feature in this article, including the recent poetic narratives of Western Australian writer John Kinsella, the first-person accounts of environmental philosopher Karen Warren in the 1990s, and the third-person writings of bioregionalist Jim Cheney in the 1980s.

“Narrative” refers to a “story” in the broadest sense. For the purposes of this article, a narrative can be defined, using Chris Barker’s notion, as “a sequential account or purported record of events ordered across time into a plot. The concept of narrative refers to the form, pattern or structure by which stories are constructed and told” (2008, 483). Arthur Bochner defines narratives simply as “stories people tell about their lives” (qtd. in Adams 2008, 176). Tony Adams argues that “narratives help us make sense of life, and in the telling of stories, we abide by storying conventions such as the use of common storylines, linear or chaotic temporal sequences, and writing within/against genres” (2008, 176). Ecosystem health researchers furthermore characterize environmental narrative as “oral environmental histories and other anecdotal sources of knowledge and perceptions that are bounded by the narrator’s experiences, observations, and attachment to place” (Robertson et al. 2001, abstract). Additionally, in his narrative analysis of the American conservationist Aldo Leopold’s classic environmental text *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), James Liszka contends that “narratives do have an argumentative force, [one which is] more rhetorical than logical” (2003, 45). Moreover, for Liszka, “a story is often more profoundly persuasive than argument alone, since it addresses the whole person, that is, in addition to logical proofs and explanations” (2003, 46). For many environmental philosophers, *A Sand County Almanac* is emblematic of an environmental narrative insofar as it fuses Leopold’s first-person prose with logical explanations of the “biotic pyramid” (Liszka 2003, 53) towards the development of a “land ethic” (Leopold 1949, 167-90). Reflecting on Leopold’s work and other stories of conservation, Deborah Slicer observes that environmental narratives require “the attentive reader to grapple, imaginatively, with intellectually and emotionally bewildering choices” (2003, 2). Narratives, according to Slicer who cites in full Joy Harjo’s prose poem “Wolf Warrior,” engage our “emotional, intelligence, empathetic and poetic imagination” (2003, 3).

Despite the apparently obvious merits of narrative for environmental practice and thought, Slicer goes on to ask: “Should environmental philosophers pay attention to narratives because they contain certain truths that are only possible through story and because stories elicit practical wisdom? Should philosophers be writing such narratives?” (2003, 2). This article responds to her questions by examining three critical components of narrative: self, context, and tradition. Part 1 argues that the unity of the narrative—expressed through the contextualization of selfhood in place, the capacity of the self to address epistemological crises, and the emotional capacity of one’s narrative voice to persuade—contributes to ethical deliberation by making explicit our evaluative processes. Part 1 advocates the ecologically resonant dimension of self—particularly evident in the work of Leopold and Kinsella—as a basis for a narrative ethics. Part 2 suggests that the emancipation of

environmental discourse from predetermination occurs through the grounding of an ethics in narrative context. Hence, narrative context provides the “sponsoring ground” (Friskics 2003, 11) for ethical deliberation. The personal and community capacity to articulate and act on moral concerns derives from this grounding in narrative context (Friskics 2003, 14-19). However, the situating of an environmental ethics in a milieu, such as Montana’s Rocky Mountain Front, is complicated by (1) the retrospective nature of narrative; (2) the problem of negotiating between rival narratives; and (3) the difficulty of determining what constitutes an appropriate context. Part 3 addresses the question of narrative traditions and argues that an appropriate narrative tradition is critical to an environmental ethics. Towards a conclusion, Part 4 draws from the concepts of self, context, and tradition to argue that narrative ethics can advance contemporary environmental thinking only in conjunction with the narrative of natural science—including geography, ecology, and evolution. Selfhood, as such, becomes rooted in the socioecological demands of time, space, and place—those constitutive elements of narrative.

More specifically, in arguing for the ethical importance of environmental stories and the conjunction of self, context, and tradition in constructing those stories, this article will examine the potential of ecopoetics to provide narratives through the example *The New Arcadia* (2005). This collection by Western Australian writer and critic John Kinsella is crucial because it exemplifies the interplay of ecopoetics and narrative environmental ethics. In the essay “The Language Habitat: An Ecopoetry Manifesto,” James Engelhardt describes ecopoetry as intrinsically engaging ethical questions: “The ecopoem is connected to the world, and this implies responsibility. Like other poetic models that assume a connection and engagement (feminism, Marxism, witness, etc.), ecopoetry is surrounded by questions of ethics” (2007, para. 5). Moreover, poets Forrest Gander and Kinsella are interested in how the narrative structure of an ecopoem can help to define an environmental ethics: “Aside from issues of theme and reference, how might syntax, line break, or the shape of the poem on the page express an ecological ethics” (Gander and Kinsella 2012, 2). Divided into five “acts,” *The New Arcadia* bears—with ecological urgency—Barker’s notion of narrative as the “form, pattern or structure by which stories are constructed and told” (Barker 2008, 483). Importantly, Kinsella’s poetic narratives link moral awareness to ecological science and phenomenological engagement. For Kinsella, aspects of self (experience in and of the environment), context (the ecosystem breakdown of the Wheatbelt of Western Australia through inappropriate farming practices), and tradition (inclusively poetic, aesthetic, and ecological) are unifying themes that, when taken together, produce a narrative environmental ethics deeply rooted in place.

2. The Unity (and Disunity) of Self through Context, Epistemology, and Voice

The ensuing discussion of contextualization of self begins with Alisdair MacIntyre’s communitarian ethics, which insist upon the central significance of narrative to moral thought as a rejection of absolutist subjectivity. MacIntyre explains: “In successfully identifying and understanding what someone else is doing we always move towards placing a particular episode in the context of a set of narrative histories, histories both of the individuals concerned and of the settings in which they act and suffer” (1981, 197). In other words, one action or episode becomes intelligible through a logical association with a history of subjects. In MacIntyre’s view, such context generates the action, the body of conclusions, and the expectations towards which the action progresses. MacIntyre reveals two conditions of the narrative self: “One is subject to the peculiarities of one’s own history and the narrative of any life is part of an interlocking set of narratives” (1981, 203). On the one hand, the latter condition alludes to the correlative aspect of selfhood; I am accountable for (or at least witness to) the chain of events that constitute my narrative and these events are verifiable by others apprehending my story. On the

other hand, the former condition maintains selfhood as a personally unique narrative spanning one's life, but constrained—"interlocking"—as part of many narratives. MacIntyre concludes that the unity of a life is the unity of a narrative of a single life. Characteristic of the narrative is the reassessment of events to make them both ever-expanding yet more coherent components of one's narrative.

Hence, the unity of a narrative is the re-evaluation of the one's circumstances in a constant movement to correlate *seems* and *is*, that is, appearance (e.g., potential negative impacts on self and the environment) and reality (e.g., actual negative impacts on self and the environment). Where there is discrepancy between *seems* and *is*, a crisis of narrative epistemology occurs. In simple terms, our ways of knowing and how we apply knowledge to life circumstances do not match. The resolution of epistemological crises and the creation of new responses depend on narratives to make intelligible the reasons for our crises or to rationalize the breakdown of our belief systems. Hence, a narrative can enable a re-evaluative response to such crises: "When an epistemological crisis is resolved, it is by the construction of a narrative which enables the agent to understand both how he or she could intelligibly have held his or her original beliefs and how he or she could have been so drastically misled by them" (MacIntyre 1977, 455). The posterior faculty of narrative, thereby, enables a means of recovery and reorientation when our belief base fails to provide reasonable outcomes—those that are extensible from our understandings of the world and self.

This aptitude of narrative for resolution during phases of epistemological crises is exemplified in Karen Warren's first-person rock-climbing narrative. The initial paradigm through which the speaker relates to the rock is one of "intense determination, using whatever strength and skills I had to accomplish this challenging feat" (Warren 1993, 327). However, by midpoint up the rock face, the narrator complains of exhaustion and anxiety as she fails to grasp certain holds and hangs dangling in midair. She regroups and again focuses determination, confidence, and concentration, eventually reaching the top of the climb. Knowing that her focus on intense determination and skill deployment nearly prevented her ascent on the first day, she re-evaluates her convictions and methods. She goes on to adopt an attitude of care and gratitude on the second day of climbing: "Gone was the determination to conquer the rock, to forcefully impose my will on it; I wanted simply to work respectfully with the rock as I climbed" (1993, 328). The narrative encompasses her whole process, her "experiences, observations, and attachment to place" (Robertson et al. 2001, abstract), including the story of her two-day ordeal, the climbing style she rejected and the one she went on to adopt. As a unified medium providing "a sequential account or purported record of events ordered across time" (Barker 2008, 483), the complete account of her rock-climbing compels us because—through its storyline—it emphasizes the ethical stance adopted of the second day, which effectively guided her actions in the environment. Moreover, the narrator's voice changes distinctly between the two days of climbing. Warren argues that the centralization of voice enables the expression of a range of situational behaviors, convictions, values, and attitudes. These are often relegated to the margins through essentialist theories of ethics. A voice as an amalgamation of the "historical, material, and social realities in which moral subjects find themselves" (Warren 1993, 329) brings human experience to ethical discourse. As evident in the rock-climbing narrative, voice brings forth an emotional response to the natural world, one which can go unregistered in ethical theory or managerialist perspectives of the environment. In sum, Warren's voice expresses a range of emotional states beginning with frustration and fear on the first day to gratitude and awe on the second.

Yet despite its presentation of the power of voice as an ethical beacon, Warren's narrative has been criticized for its marginalization of dimensions of self, particularly in reference to feminist claims for the twin

domination of women and nature. Phillip Payne offers two ways Warren's imperative for first-person narrative can be interpreted. The first, the "historical self," relates to the historical, social, and material identities of self. The second, the "social self," is positioned in a temporal, spatial, and symbolic flux that amplifies the historical self. Payne claims that Warren's historical self privileges the subjectivity of the "felt" part of the experience, thereby marginalizing important contextual meanings of the social self. Payne suggests that "Warren's historical self reproduces the subject/object, mind/body, agency/structure dichotomies she is so rightly concerned about, thus usurping the suggestiveness of her ethical conclusions emerging from grounded experience in ethical deliberation" (1994, 142). In other words, text and context are bifurcated in Warren's narrative. The contexts that need amplification in Payne's view are the historical, social, and material realities of rock-climbing and more, generally, the social self related to the tradition of leisure. Rock-climbing, in particular, has been customarily associated with white male participation; an ethos of domination over nature; the social and economic capital of sophisticated technologies and gear; the escapism of wilderness pilgrimages; and the trivialization of local and urban environments. Moreover, Warren's narrative fails to acknowledge the tradition of conqueror intrinsic to the practice of rock-climbing. By recontextualizing Warren's narrative in socio-environmental life world of rock-climbing and leisure, Payne brings the metanarrative of the twin dominations of women and nature to prominence and strengthens the moral subject's accountability to the broader contexts in which she operates.

A strength of narrative for forwarding environmental ethics resides in its expression of a unified self. Beginning with MacIntyre's contextualized self as a mode of negotiating epistemological crises, we see how narrative can make intelligible human actions within a context (a place, a bioregion, a rock face). However, a crisis ensues when our approaches fail to correspond to our worldviews. The capacity of narrative for the re-evaluation of such crises presents the possibility of an adaptable and intelligible environmental ethics. Moreover, a first-person narrative centralizes the voice of the moral agent. As such, emotional expression infuses the cold, hard objectivity of an ethical position, as shown by Warren's rock-climbing story. Yet, as Payne suggests, critical dimensions of self and context can be minimized in narratives. This diminishes the ethical integrity of the narrative in confronting broader socio-environmental contexts—such as the masculinist and bourgeoisie tradition of rock-climbing and the unannounced role of the ecology of the rock face in the narrative—in which human actions take place.

3. The Grounding of Ethical Decision-Making in Context

The contextualization of selfhood is a critical component of a narrative ethics. If the self is contextualized reflexively in the natural history of a place and in the tradition of human activity such as rock-climbing, then the ethic can reflect the circumstances of the moral agent's story and setting. Thereby, the narrative can make possible the release of ethics from predetermination through the contextualization of discourse. MacIntyre emphasizes the significance of the circumstances and moral context that make decisions intelligible (Horton and Mendus 1994, 9). Theorists of narrative environmental ethics concur with MacIntyre's insistence on moral context. For example, Cheney describes the perils of abstracting concepts and theories from their paradigm settings and applying them elsewhere: "Although these abstractions are fully intelligible only within the paradigm settings which gave birth to them, such abstractions can achieve a life of their own; they can be articulated in accordance with canons of coherence and made into apparently self-contained wholes *ready for export* and application to a variety of settings" (1989, 121; italics added). In Cheney's view, since narratives

embed an understanding of self in the world, the best stories we can tell are those which offer bioregional and situational truths, rather than universal and exportable principles. Cheney continues: “To contextualize ethical deliberation is, in some sense, to provide a narrative or story, from which the solution to the ethical dilemma emerges as the fitting conclusion” (1987, 145). A bioregional orientation holds that narrative and context should extend outward from human communities to encompass non-human communities. Through the grounding of narratives in bioregions, a non-anthropocentric form of selfhood can emerge. Moreover, bioregional realities moderate the need for constant re-contextualization of ethical principles once exported (Cheney 1987, 128).

The significance of narrative in ethical discourse is also argued for by Holmes Rolston III: “An environmental ethic does not want to abstract out universals, if such there are, from all this drama of life, formulating some set of duties applicable across the whole.... Ethics must be written in theory with universal intent, but the theory must permit and require ethics to be lived in practice in the first person singular” (Rolston 1986, 10). Similarly, Warren describes the power of first-person narratives for conceptualizing ethical meanings. Ethical models emerge out of the particular situations moral agents find themselves; they are not imposed on situations and places as the extension of a predetermined principle (Warren 1993, 329).

The narrative’s grounding in context enables a more forceful articulation of emergent ethical principles having tangible outcomes for an agent: a rock climber, a flower, or a large-scale system such as Montana’s Rocky Mountain Front. Cheney reflects on the indigenous Russian Ainu conception of fire as witness to the treatment of game. He observes that mythical images in narrative convey moral imperatives that instruct by delimiting the moral space that where we physically live (1989, 129). For Cheney, narratives weave together knowledge of place, health, and community. Narratives offer moral imperatives to the community with the argumentative power of reality and fact (Cheney 1989, 130) or, as Liszka comments, “narratives do have an argumentative force, [one which is] more rhetorical than logical” (2003, 45). Anthropological literature in particular reveals the reliance of traditional cultures on narratives for moral instruction. For instance, the lives of traditional Athapaskan Koyukon of northwest interior Alaska are guided by stories called “Distant Time,” in which moral imperatives assume the form of taboos governing the human interaction with the natural world. Anthropologist Richard Nelson comments:

The narratives also provide an extensive code of proper behaviour toward the environment and its resources. They contain many episodes showing that certain kinds of actions toward nature can have bad consequences, and these are taken as guidelines to follow today. Stories therefore serve as a medium for instructing young people in the traditional code and as an infallible standard of conduct for everyone. (1983, 18)

These kinds of narrative moral imperatives—place-bound ethical instructions with practical implications for material and spiritual realms—have been incorporated into a postmodern environmental paradigms where local milieu is linked the ethical principles (Cheney 1989, 130).

While narratives might offer an appealing call to ecofeminist sensibilities, certain critiques have been levelled at the role of context. Some theorists maintain the Sartrean position that, since a narrative can only be comprehensible in retrospect, it must present a falsified account of life (Johnson 1994, 57). Such criticism of the retrospective quality of narrative suggests that the reader’s grappling “imaginatively, with intellectually and emotionally bewildering choices” (Slicer 2003, 2) can stall decision-making processes. Critics of narrative argue that the immediate context (i.e., the Wheatbelt region of Western Australia) can be distanced temporally from the moral agent (i.e., the poet), thus making difficult the production of real outcomes through a narrative

environmental ethics. Since the appropriate decision comes after considering the “interlocking set of narratives” (MacIntyre 1981, 203), the unique circumstances of the decision-making moment are lost to the more contemplative or reflective aspects of narrative. Context could be lost here. The quickly passing dimensions of the decision-making process fade as the moral agents consider past and future. Surely the strength of narrative is that it offers a context reflexive and sensitive to moral agents. Instead of abstracting out universalized principles and imposing them on situations calling for ethical intervention, the narrative internally generates an ethic most fitting the peculiarities of the setting and the self. Since a narrative ethic reflects the milieu, it most convincingly can convey moral imperatives with practical implications for the human and non-human agents involved. However, questions include how to select and emphasize one context within many contexts (for example, ecological contexts over social or historical realities). The choice of context is an important variable in a narrative ethics. How do we evaluate rival narratives?

4. The Question of Traditions

MacIntyre characterizes a tradition as an ongoing negotiation which requires frequent examination in addressing epistemological realities. According to MacIntyre, one of the signs of a tradition in crisis is that accepted methods for convening *seems* and *is* begin to fall apart (1977, 459). Therefore, a central aspect of tradition involves epistemological debate: “A tradition then not only embodies the narrative of an argument, but is only to be recovered by an argumentative retelling of that narrative which will itself be in conflict with other argumentative retellings” (1977, 461). The objective should be a more intelligible historical narrative than previously held. In MacIntyre’s view, this renegotiation occurs during periods when crises of epistemology challenge an expectation of outcome.

Traditions, then, characterize the efficacy of our ethical-decision making. If we invoke an inappropriate tradition where a discrepancy between *seems* and *is* lingers (e.g., the rock face is represented as a mere surface for human recreation rather than a fragile ecosystem in its own right), then the resultant ethic will too be fragmented. The tradition here is of natural science. In illuminating the role of tradition in narrative ethics, consider the concept of nature as conversational partner. With an empiricist view of nature, is it appropriate to conceive of narratives as mediums through which nature speaks to us? Posited by Christopher Preston, this critique recognizes that the metaphor of conversing with the environment lacks sense without an animistic tradition of nature. Along with Cheney, Donna Haraway employs this metaphor to further an argument for partiality, objectivity, and situated knowledge: “Perhaps our hopes for accountability, for politics, for ecofeminism, turns on revisioning the world as coding trickster with whom we must learn to converse” (1988, 597). Cheney and Haraway agree on a model of nature’s agency that frames the inquirer as a conversational partner. This tradition is derived from accounts of Native American spirituality on which ecological thinkers have relied for 30 years for ethical frameworks (See J. Baird Callicott’s 1982 article for a Romantic point of view).

Yet, this appropriation of a characteristically Native American worldview is probably not the most suitable for a postmodern account of nature’s agency. Preston comments: “Without a metaphysic that acknowledges personhood to nature, and there is nothing in postmodernism to suggest that rocks are actually persons, the idea of inquiry as a form of conversation appears to be a difficult one to make sense of” (2000, 231-32). Nature as conversational partner is comprehensible within the tradition of Native American spirituality, but the exportation of this animistic account of nature to contemporary settings may be counterproductive to yielding

an appropriate environmental ethic. Cheney and Haraway's adoption of the paradigm of nature as conversational partner seems to work against their insistence on context, situated knowledge, and bioregional imagination. Mick Smith observes of Cheney's presumably postmodern bioregional and Indigenous narrative:

It is *foundationalist* insofar as it makes bioregions the necessary grounds for all the properly contextual discourse. It is *colonizing* to the extent that it appears in an international journal written in English, the most widespread colonial language. It is *essentializing* in its conception of all modernism as inherently divorced from place and *totalizing* in its pretension to provide a universal human history. (2001, 8-9)

Tradition here is critical. The selection of an inappropriate tradition can impoverish ethical decision-making by distorting contexts and notions of selfhood. Ecofeminist inclusion of Indigenous traditions in postmodern discourse—as an attempt at dissolving essentialization and bringing context to ethical deliberation—conflates two potentially divergent value systems: postmodern and Indigenous.

What tradition should be invoked, then, to give birth to new narratives of the natural world? Preston argues that an ecological and evolutionary tradition is a useful way to inform narratives. Following MacIntyre's characterization of a tradition as an extended historical argument embedded in social context, Preston regards ecology and evolution as appropriate traditions for the contextually informed environmental negotiations. Furthermore, according to Preston, ecological and (debatably) evolutionary traditions are non-hierarchical. Ecology in particular is non-anthropocentric in its emphasis on biological and geological material realities that define environments:

What is distinctive about the ecological and evolutionary tradition when compared to many of the contexts typically called upon to bring normativity to narratives is that it draws on accounts of material and biological structures to supplement the social structures which usually dominate our narratives.... Including accounts of ecological and evolutionary nature in our narratives is desirable, then, both because it demands from us accountability to material reality and because it grounds our environmental norms. (Preston 2001, 252-53)

The selection of an appropriate tradition is vital to the genesis of a viable narrative environmental ethic. MacIntyre's concept of tradition as an argumentative retelling of narrative is applicable to models of environmental ethics where re-evaluation is key. Within the narrative, the selection of a tradition determines the correlation of expectation and outcome, of *seems* and *is*. This is especially evident in cases of environmental conflict where inappropriate traditions are imposed on human and non-human agents (see Friskics 2003). The appropriation of the Native American tradition of animism and the related adoption of the metaphor of nature as a conversational partner pose possible problems for an appropriate narrative model of environmental ethics. Preston's call for ecological and evolutionary traditions as means for holding agents accountable to material and biological realities presents a compelling insight into what an appropriate environmental narrative might look like.

5. Self, Context, and Tradition in a Narrative Ethic of Nature: Examples from Environmental Writing

The preceding sections have examined the narrative themes of self, context, and tradition for their roles in helping to develop an environmental ethics. This article has argued for a unity of self in narrative. Unit of self is achieved through evaluative process where actions and choices are made intelligible and where voice is given an opportunity for emotional expression. The contextualization of ethical decision-making in narrative provides

the force for locally or bioregionally crafted deliberation. The inclusion of appropriate traditions—with emphasis on ecological and evolutionary narratives—is crucial to the creation of a narrative ethic of nature. The promise of a narrative ethic of the environment resides in its capacity to address local conditions and yield moral parameters reflective of the peculiarities of the environment in which the agent acts. In other words, by countering the essentializing tendency of a universalized and abstracted ethic, a narrative ethic gives voice to the moral agent. The narrative permits a reflective response—a self-correcting and reflexive rejoinder—which makes clear the follies of previous choices. Such a deliberative process renders context into an intelligible baseline from which ethical action can proceed.

The concept of narrative resolves the lingering difficulty here, namely the question “which came first, the ethic or the environment?”. In other words, how can we judge if our actions within the environment merit their formulation into an ethical premise? Could it be that there is insufficient “ground” in narrative? There is no guarantee that a freely subjective construction of the natural world through narrative will not eradicate accountability to the material realities of an environment—a unique composition of geology, biology, and non-human agents. This article, therefore, argues that the unity of self and community in local context must be accompanied by the tradition of natural science (geology, ecology, and evolution) to provide the “sponsoring ground” (Friskics 2003, 11) of environmental ethics. Reference to ecological science ensures that the narrative ethic is, indeed, of the environment. The unified self of the agent—reflecting socio-environmental contexts within a tradition of natural science—can advance an environmental ethics. The re-evaluative capacity of narrative—exemplified by Warren’s trials and tribulations on the rock face—can lead to an ethic incorporating local knowledge as well as human and non-human voices. The prioritization of the natural science tradition in narrative ethics supports the unity of the ecological self. It frees ethical deliberation from questions of appropriate context.

The discussion will now turn to two first-person narratives and consider them for their dimensions of self, context, and tradition. Here is a more complete passage from Warren:

I closed my eyes and began to feel the rock with my hands –the cracks and crannies, the raised lichen and mosses, the almost imperceptible nubs that might provide a resting place for my fingers and toes when I began to climb. At that moment, I was bathed in serenity. I began to talk to the rock in an almost inaudible, child-like way, as if the rock were my friend. I felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude for what it offered me—a chance to know myself and the rock differently, to appreciate unforeseen miracles like the tiny flowers growing in the even tinier cracks in the rock’s surface, and to come to know a sense of being in relationship with the natural environment. (1994, 328)

Now consider Preston’s sensuous counter-narrative to Warren’s rock-climbing episode:

Now on one of the several islands in the middle of Rattlesnake Creek, I found myself immersed in a bustling community of both the biotic and abiotic. A kingfisher rattled noisily up stream to resume its water watching from a more comfortable distance. An osprey sat on a snag tearing at its still dripping prey, turning piscine protein into avian muscle. I could smell the profusion that is a subalpine springtime in the dense evening air. I felt it on my skin. It pressed against my ears and worked its way into my hair. I was surrounded by life stories and stories of life. (2001, 259)

Despite their obvious appeal, there are inherent problems with both Warren and Preston’s representations of self. As discussed in Part 1, the coherency of one’s narrative pertains both to how it is understood by self and how others understand it. The narrative of a single life is part of an interlocking set of narratives, in MacIntyre’s terms. The circumstances of one’s story are intelligible when apprehended by self and community, in this case, by the reader. Simply put, we do not know enough about the speakers in both episodes. Therefore, their choices

are not as intelligible as they could be and any ethical stance resulting from these narratives would lack accountability to other narratives, traditions, and contexts. Moreover, both speakers do not adequately treat the social dimensions of self, particularly those metanarrative elements of rock-climbing and bicycling—the domination of nature, for example—those qualities, which, intentionally or not, express themselves as inherent realities of the chosen modes of engagement with nature. How can Warren and Preston assume that one and two-day recreational excursions offer sufficient time to develop a form of narrative in which the self is expressed adequately in relation to the cadences of place? In order for the self to achieve a higher order of unity, a broader temporal context is needed. Such a context would represent the socio-environmental realities of their activities and the ecological realities of their respective place as intrinsic to notions of self as rock climber or as bicyclist.

In terms of context and tradition, Preston's narrative better exemplifies the integration of natural science—the bustling community of the kingfisher and osprey, the life stories and stories of life—with his personal insights—the sensations of skin, ears, hair, and sight. He draws from the ecological tradition in describing the dripping prey. The remainder of his story is permeated with details of ecology and evolutionary references. The emerging ethic could be one which will encompass the awe and respect the speaker has for his tradition. Warren's narrative, by contrast, is too anthropocentric to offer an appropriate environmental ethic. She represents nature as a backdrop for her felt experience. Though replete with details of the rock, the narrative divorces the rock from its environment and herself as moral agent. Ecology and evolution are obscured in favor of the speaker's overwhelming emotional surges. The rock-climbing narrative does not hold the speaker accountable to the rock's tradition as abiotic member of an ecosystem. The narrative tracks her evaluative responses but does not achieve a unity of self tied to context and tradition; natural science is marginalized. In simpler terms, Warren's story puts the person first in the first-person, to the detriment of environment.

The natural world must be recognized as an agent in environmental narratives. The selection of a tradition of natural science makes possible an active role and contextualizes the discourse surrounding the narrative. However, the self must also be recognized for its narrative importance. A unified self is one which engages reflection as a critical mode of ethics. This self-reflection within the context of natural science is crucial to an environmental ethic that emerges from narrative. Warren's much heralded rock-climbing narrative does not exemplify the kind of narrative that facilitates environmental ethics, whereas Preston's counter-narrative exhibits the commingling of nature (ecology and evolution) and first-person detail. His narrative offers the beginning of an ethic encompassing world and self. A narrative that heeds natural science (to include geography, ecology, and evolution) should also portray self grounded in socio-environmental realities and a broad temporal context. Simply, the narratives of Warren and Preston are too abbreviated and Romantic (and consequently underdeveloped) to offer ethical traction. Warren's narrative is especially limited by its own first-person immediacy to acknowledge the environmental realities of natural science and social histories of the rock face. It is only by sufficiently and *appropriately* representing the intersection of nature and culture that narrative can offer an appropriate environmental ethics.

To offer a counter-example to the limited narratives of Preston and Warren, the article will now conclude with the ecopoetry of Western Australian writer John Kinsella. The works of Kinsella (1963-), a prolific writer of over 35 collections of poetry and a literary critic who lives in the Wheatbelt east of Perth, Western Australia, can be conceived of, collectively and on a poem-by-poem basis, as environmental narratives with strong ethical underpinnings. His poetry displays an acute awareness of place and ecology. Kinsella's work upsets the notion

of landscape as an idyllic recreational space where humans can commune with nature. The environments he writes of are deeply fragmented places polarized between people, flora, and fauna. In fact, Kinsella's poetry has been self-characterized as "poison pastoralism" or "anti-pastoralism," the latter a term proposed by literary critic Terry Gifford to denote the tension of "how to find a voice that does not lose sight of authentic connectedness with nature, in the process of exposing the language of the idyll" (1995, 55). Moreover, Kinsella's narratives deploy knowledge of ecology and linguistic experimentation in response to the question of "how might syntax, line break, or the shape of the poem on the page express an ecological ethics?" (Gander and Kinsella 2012, 2). His ecopoetic approach is rooted in the regional ecological crisis of the Wheatbelt where close to 90% of the original (i.e., preceding European colonization) vegetation has been eradicated within 170 years. The loss of indigenous tree cover has led to the catastrophic salination of the soil. Kinsella's work reflects these material realities and is not circumscribed by mere speculative Romantic notions of human and non-human harmonies in the environment.

Kinsella's *The New Arcadia* (2005) is divided into five "acts." Each act begins with a poem called "Reflectors," each subtitled according to a sequence of drives. For example, there are the poems "Reflectors: Drive 1" (Kinsella 2005, 3-10) and "Reflector: Drive 2" (2005, 45-51). The "Reflectors" ensemble provides narrative cohesion to the collection and tracks the poet's movements from the city of Perth to his rural home in the Wheatbelt. In particular, Kinsella's poetry about the salination of the Wheatbelt provides some evidence of the environmental ethics emerging from his narratives. The poem "Salt is Part of the Environment" (2005, 171-72) is an acerbic commentary on the bureaucratic assumption that salt is merely part of the ecosystem. In fact, as Kinsella stresses, the salinity crisis has been brought about through human mismanagement of the Wheatbelt ecosystem, not the intrusion of salt per se:

These places are often saline.
It's what demographers
might call natural salt depression,
the water table divulging itself
within the fabric of plant growth,
like bio-necessity. Clearing melaleucas
and flooded gums, the big drinkers,
it extends—naturally—up from recession
into planar surfaces: paddocks,
house yards, catching pens. (lines 9-18)

Kinsella here alludes to the technical language of demographers. Terms like "natural salt depression" are part of the scientific discourse used to justify the occurrence of the salt infiltration that the poet observes to be out-of-control. However, the actual cause (invoking MacIntyre's distinction between *seems* and *is*) of the salinity is the clearing of indigenous tree species, such as melaleucas and flooded gums that, with their deep roots, controlled the flow of salt to the topsoil. These kinds of trees were considered "big drinkers" by European colonists and were accordingly cleared to ensure a water supply for pastoral development of what would later become the Wheatbelt. The steady creeping of the salt through "paddocks/house yards, catching pens" occurs "naturally," yet the natural world here has been deeply fractured by broad-scale devastation and absolute colonial blindness to the homeostasis existing between water, salt, soil, and roots. The emotions of an ecological self speak of the biotic context and its devastation: "the sunset cutting in like fear / or a reminder of loss" (lines 4-5). Kinsella laments:

The equation
 doesn't balance—quirky
 like the animals who inhabit
 these places. Condemned to trial
 by media, written up
 by the 'all that glisters is not gold'
 school of journalism. (lines 30-36)

The "equation doesn't balance" here refers to the failure of science and media to right the wrong of (and truthfully represent) the ecological devastation of the region. The flora and fauna of the Wheatbelt are peculiarly adapted to the biological constraints of the environment, yet this originary ecology has been fragmented and erased, replaced by ill-suited agricultural enterprise. This criticism of science recurs in the poem "Salt Semi-Ode" (2005, 172):

critics research remnant bushland
 until seeds can no longer purchase sand,
 and science becomes art as poets
 build Sodom and Gomorrah, and visionary boats
 sail out on halcyon mirages,
 all colours played by crystals,
 shimmering blankness and wire-rust gauges,
 poverty and sadness as expansion stalls. (lines 5-12)

For Kinsella, conservation science represents an inappropriate response that ultimately stalls the renewal of the vegetation and the holding back of the salinity. The poetic narrative picks up where the science cannot, representing the place for what it is, in all of its "poverty and sadness" and providing a platform for ethics to develop. The ecological (and ethical) self of Kinsella is a strong current throughout his salt poems. In "Salt is the Residue of Hauntings" (2005, 173), the sadness intensifies through reflection on the agricultural practices destroying the Wheatbelt ecosystem: "bulk handling ... a wealth of ectoplasm / exchanged for the bag count of lost years" (lines 22-23). Kinsella's poetic narratives are firmly fixed in the context of the Wheatbelt; in the traditions of poetry, ecology, and Australian colonization; and in an ecological self immersed in its environment. Importantly, Kinsella's ecopoetry suggests that a critical perspective of science as a tradition within a context is more important than uncritical engagement with ecology in narrative, as Preston's excerpt demonstrated. Hence, understanding of ecological science, in critical conjunction with self and context, is crucial to the formation of a narrative ethics.

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