

## Clearing the ground for a greener New Zealand English

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*ABSTRACT: In the context of public and policy concerns about human induced climate change, it is striking that dominant models and histories of English teaching marginalise the environmental significance of English as a school subject (Matthewman, 2010). This is in spite of a growing body of ecocritical work within English and cultural studies which has explored the relationship between cultural texts and environmental thinking (Buell, 2005; Clark, 2011; Garrard, 2012; Glotfelty, 1996; Kerridge & Sammells, 1998). This article explores the potential for teachers in New Zealand to clear the ground for a “greener” version of English. This could be facilitated by a number of features which are unique to the New Zealand context. These include the powerful (though contested) imagery of New Zealand’s environmental purity; the historical relationships of New Zealanders to the land; the integration of Māori environmental values into educational policy; the relative openness of the national curriculum in New Zealand; the absence of a dominant canon and tradition of English teaching; and the recent turn towards New Zealand literature (with its strong emphasis on links to the land) in literary choices for study. The article will examine traditions of English in New Zealand against the social, cultural and environmental factors which offer the potential for ecocritical versions of English to emerge within new models of teachers’ professional practice.*

*KEYWORDS: English curriculum, English teaching, ecocriticism, environmental education, environmental sustainability, Education for Sustainability.*

### INTRODUCTION

Few would deny that we live in a time of intense and dangerous environmental crisis. We have entered the anthropocene: a time dominated by human impacts on the earth; of ecological risk (Beck, 1992); of Gaia’s revenge (Lovelock, 2006) and of environmental consequences causing hardship and devastation around the globe (Gore, 2006; Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2014). Images and reports of environmental problems and crisis are a daily part of media and lived experience. What, then, would explain the relative silence in school curriculum documents on matters of sustainability within nations such as the UK and New Zealand? This paper challenges the idea that the articulation of school subjects can continue to assume “business as usual” in dealing with the planet. Instead, this paper is an argument for a curricular and pedagogic response to a changed world order. The case considered is that of subject English in the context of New Zealand.

All subjects have a responsibility to explain and respond to the world. This paper focuses on the response of English to the environmental crisis within a “post-carbon curriculum” (Matthewman & Morgan, 2013). In explaining this response I draw on

my experiences as a teacher educator in the UK, and as a researcher in New Zealand. In the UK over the period 2005-2012, I worked with teachers to explore the practical ways in which school English could become an *ecocritical*<sup>1</sup> subject (see Matthewman, 2010). Teachers developed classroom initiatives in English, which were underpinned by a response to *ecocriticism*, the term most commonly used to define the green movement in University English studies (see for example Buell, 2005; Clark, 2011; Garrard, 2012; Glotfelty, 1996; Kerridge & Sammells, 1998). Ecocriticism connects readily with English but sharpens and shifts the gaze onto the environmental implications of texts. This is partly through text selection or an “environmental canon” (see Buell, 1995) but mainly through analytical work that uses research on ecological, geographical and biological contexts to focus on the representation of nature, built and natural environments, and the relationship between the human and non-human. Ecocriticism has evolved to become highly inclusive of a range of cultural and media texts: “ecocriticism seeks to track environmental ideas and representations wherever they appear” (Kerridge & Sammells, 1998, p. 5). This inclusivity fits well with the wide remit of English in schools. Ecocriticism is a rich field of study which, like any branch of literary theory, resists neat closure. However, an attempt at categorising the broad principles of ecocriticism specifically for teachers of English is provided in Matthewman (2010) and a concise but authoritative discussion of the history of ecocritical theorising and practice is given by Buell (2012).

In this paper I want to shift the focus to New Zealand (while making comparative glances to the UK) to try to bring into focus a curriculum and a culture which, I suggest, has the potential to move towards a “greener” version of English. New Zealand is powerfully imagined and represented as a country of environmental splendour and purity with a deep history of affinity for the land (Bell, 1996). At the same time it is a country deeply conscious of competing in a neoliberal, global marketplace in which the natural world is sold both as a tourist attraction and as a set of consumable, marketable assets (Werry, 2012). English has the flexibility to be a subject that interrogates such conflicting positions and values. In the project of developing an ecological vision for English, New Zealand may offer a context less constrained by curricular pressures, canons and practices than the UK and more responsive to environmental concerns. In the next section I will give a brief overview of the history of New Zealand secondary English in relation to the space available to develop an ecological approach to the subject.

## TRADITIONS OF ENGLISH

It has been argued that English as a subject in New Zealand schools began as part of the colonial project to cultivate a version of pastoral England in the heart and on the soil (Snook, 1989). The school curriculum was originally based on that of England, with the additional project of the “correction” of New Zealand idiom (Soler, 2000). During the 1930s and 1940s New Zealand inherited the Leavisite view of the study of the traditional English literary canon as a civilising and humanising force (Mayo, 2000; Stoop, 1998). This neocolonial history is still reflected in the recent centrality

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<sup>1</sup> Ecocriticism is not critical literacy with an “eco” focus but derives from literary theory. However, the discourse of critical literacy fits well with an ecocritical approach.

of Shakespeare in the New Zealand curriculum while other English canonical texts are strongly represented in teachers' shared lists of regularly taught texts.<sup>2</sup> This is despite the fact that there has never been a prescribed list of authors in New Zealand, unlike in England.

There is a link between the settlers' work in clearing the bush and forest to create a version of English pasture and the ideological mission to plant representations of English environment and nature in the imaginations of children. Both projects shaped the relationship of people to the land. In England a strong tradition of literary writing about English nature and the English environment was linked with the tradition of English teaching. This was a tradition which saw English as having a role in developing aesthetic and moral attitudes to nature, environment and culture. Leavis and Thompson (1933) sought to promote the teaching of the great tradition of English literature in schools as part of the imaginative preservation of a sense of the organic community and close links with the rural environment.

The original project and mission of English thus involved reading great literature in order to form an aesthetic and critical appreciation and knowledge of the landscape. Obviously, children growing up in New Zealand would experience the body of traditional English literature as a distant representation of an estranged nature and a different, if related, environment and culture. The study of the English literary canon simply did not have the same ecocritical potential embedded in it for New Zealand children; it was a nature that they had left behind, or never known. Indeed, children's author Margaret Mahy writes of the "colonisation" of her imagination through the nearly exclusive exposure to English literary texts (Jackson, 2011).

Meanwhile, a specifically New Zealand literature took time to emerge as the consciousness of New Zealand identity developed. The period of the 1930s is contentiously held to represent the first generation of New Zealand writers (Broughton, 1973, Pound, 2010) and there was a time lag before New Zealand literature became an object of study in New Zealand classrooms and this was still being contested by teachers who advocated a traditional canon during the 1990s (Stoop, 1998). However, New Zealand literature has emerged as a powerful, if largely untapped, ecocritical resource (Rawlins, 2003). From the outset, the land was the defining force on Pākehā (white European heritage) writers and artists while the relationship to this new land and new nature was (and is) a defining force in the culture (Steven, 1989; Bell 1996). Similarly Māori culture and art went through a renaissance of consciousness in the 1960s and this, together with fierce and ongoing disputes over land ownership and management, have been part of an emerging bicultural identity in which Māori and Pākehā work out the terms of engagement. The relationship of English teaching to Māori culture and language, and to an emergent Pacific identity has been highly significant although thoroughly unresolved with ongoing debates about bilingualism and language policy (Lee, 1990; Locke, 2002, 2010; Middleton, 1994; Stoop, 1998).

However, English as a study of the traditional English canon was first challenged, not by literary developments or biculturalism, but by progressive versions of English

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<sup>2</sup> Shakespeare was until recently the only prescribed text through bursary examination and as a NCEA standards but this was dropped in 2012. This information comes from lists of texts commonly taught by teachers collated by staff at the University of Auckland.

centring on personal growth dominant in England in the mid 1960s, and in Australia and New Zealand in the 1970s following the Dartmouth conference, and the publication of Dixon's paradigm shifting *Growth through English* (1975) (Locke, 2000; Stoop, 1998). As a flexible version of English, this allowed responsive approaches to issues. In England this entailed attention to issues of race and gender and the pressing environmental crisis of nuclear war. However, in the UK the eighties was a period of backlash against teacher autonomy and issue-based teaching. Debates about standards in reading, writing and spelling became dominant in the British press and the UK national curriculum published in 1990 was clearly intended to standardise assessment in English as well as to define the terms of the subject beyond "growth". The development of the national curriculum in New Zealand published in 1994 shared the UK emphasis on assessment levels. This was the main constraint upon the work of the curriculum developers, causing considerable concern for English specialists (e.g. Bendall, 1994; Locke, 2000; Locke, 2007). Personal growth was cited as an influence, with a "muted" emphasis on literary heritage, which stressed the relevance of New Zealand texts to personal, cultural and national identity (Locke, 2007, p. 38). This encouraged a turn towards New Zealand writers as objects of literary study.

New Zealand literature is rooted in relationships to the land but the emphasis in critique of this literature is upon the formation of national identity (Jackson, 2011). This follows the pattern of critique in University English Studies, which has been to privilege race, culture and gender as the hot topics rather than environment (Glotfelty, 1996). A literary concern with the land does not necessarily translate into a classroom focus on environment; the non-human is frequently the subordinate in a nature/culture binary, while plot and character take precedence over setting.

This is a binary relationship that ecocritics challenge. The non-human is made central to reading and the divide between nature and culture is shown to be thoroughly meshed as "natureculture". For instance, an ecocritical touchstone is McKibben's (1990) claim that the concept of nature has ended, a claim which paradoxically asserts our desperate dependence on a fragile world that needs to be put first. An extensive literature search for texts taught in New Zealand revealed no specifically ecocritical studies at all, except of texts firmly within the English canon, such as Shakespeare. However, the concept of place as an influence has begun to emerge as an important theme in collections and critical commentary, primarily as part of the work of defining Aotearoa New Zealandness, rather than as part of an ecocritical movement (see for example Hebley, 1998; Calder, 2011). A concept of personal growth through English can contain the development of a cultural identity in relation to the environment and an understanding of the human relationship to nature. Ecocriticism offers a more assertive shift towards developing a specifically environmental identity, which takes account of the growing awareness and knowledge of ecological crisis. The study of New Zealand literature is rich in potential to develop this ecocritical understanding in students.

Unfortunately, as in England, the recent emphasis on literacy and technical and technological competence in relation to standards has worked against both the concept of personal growth through literary study and the development of critical literacy. This more utilitarian version of English is based on the development of skills and competences for the workplace. The competency curriculum model offers considerable freedom to teachers in terms of choice of texts and approach, but little in

the way of guidance and direction in how to journey towards meeting strict assessment standards. In the absence of a strong vision and tradition for English, this might risk a model of curriculum design based on completing assessment tasks which meet assessment standards by the most direct route possible. For an outsider, a specifically New Zealand vision for English is hard to grasp from the myriad debates in the current literature, although this may be part of the lived experience of teachers. Certainly the emergence of a New Zealand vision for English may be hard to realise under the pressure of accountability to standards (Locke, 2002; Locke, 2010). Meanwhile in the UK, past utopian visions for English as a powerful and “dangerous” subject are stifled by managerialism and standardisation. While the resonance of an ecological vision for English has been recognised, reviewers of *Teaching Secondary English as if the Planet Matters* (Matthewman, 2010) have commented on the dissonance of this work with the dominant version of English in schools in the UK (Teagle, 2013; Stevens, 2013).

### **EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABILITY: AN OPEN DOOR?**

Given the present pressure on English as being primarily about literacy standards, it might be expected that sustainability and environment should be marginal concerns for the subject in school. Perhaps more surprising is the silence in the curriculum as a whole. To date, the pressure of climate change, the energy crisis and widespread concerns about environmental challenges have not been significantly represented within the national curricula of either the UK or New Zealand. Snook (2007) identifies the lack of attention to sustainability as one of the major gaps of the current New Zealand curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) and Eames and Barker (2011), key proponents of Education for Sustainability in New Zealand, report that integration of sustainability teaching into the secondary curriculum is still a major challenge.

There is no settled place for Education for Sustainability in either the English or the New Zealand curriculum. Although the most recent New Zealand curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) places ecological sustainability as one of its core values and lists sustainability as part of the principles of future focus in curriculum planning, as Eames, Cowie and Bolstad (2008) point out, there is still a significant tension between these curriculum aspirations to integrate sustainability into the curriculum and school-based curriculum planning. In effect, sustainability risks being squeezed out of the secondary curriculum where there is an emphasis on achieved NCEA standards in the core subjects. Furthermore, Snook (2007) argues that not only are values such as sustainability, environmentalism, citizenship and globalisation not followed through in the guidance for learning areas, but that they are actively undermined by the ubiquitous focus on enterprise. He argues that this is a reflection of the powerful influence of the business lobby and contends that this amounts to the indoctrination of a particular set of neoliberal values to create “passive consumers on the one hand and exploiters on the other” (p. 40). Similarly, Tulloch (2009) writing about the marginalisation of EFS in the curriculum, points out that sustainability is coupled with enterprise and globalisation in the “future focus” theme with no indication that this collocation involves a fundamental conflict of values.

The result is that sustainability is marginalised and undermined as a cross curricular project within a secondary curriculum dominated by accreditation in key learning areas. Significantly, as Snook (2007) points out, there is nothing to stop teachers from challenging these dominant neoliberal values within their teaching and curriculum choices – that is within learning areas (loosely school subjects) such as English. The curriculum door is, in theory at least, left open for an alternative ecological vision to emerge. In the next section I will discuss the background to a case study of New Zealand teachers developing an ecocritical practice.

## GLIMPSES OF ECOCRITICAL ENGLISH IN AOTEAROA

My own lesson observations and discussions with teachers in the UK suggested that despite support, committed and imaginative teachers were only able to tinker with ecocritical approaches through creative work on the margins of the curriculum. Through chance rather than disillusionment, I emigrated to New Zealand in 2012 and took up a researcher post at the University of Auckland. I led a year-long research project into the potential of ecocritical approaches within English and the Arts in a secondary school in Auckland with a low socio-economic rating. I worked closely with three English teachers and two art teachers, basing the professional development aspect of the project on the process of shared ecocritical reading of texts. Like many other immigrants before me, I encountered a different cultural mix, and an unfamiliar natural ecology and built environment.

As an educationalist and a teacher of English, I encountered a version of English which I recognised but which was inflected differently, particularly in relation to post-colonialism. In the UK I was a teacher educator over a fourteen year period (1998-2012) and I became used to seeing very different versions of English played out in different schools and different classrooms—from rigid objective and teacher-led, highly disciplined teaching to exploratory classrooms dominated by group work and student enquiry.

There is always a diversity of practices in relation to an official curriculum. In making some tentative reflections on English teaching in New Zealand, I am under no illusions that the version of English played out in one New Zealand school is representative of dominant practice. However, it is worth pointing out that during this period of teaching in the UK, explicit literacy teaching and highly structured work became the dominant model of delivery driven by the literacy strategy expressed in the *Framework for Teaching English* (DfEE, 2001). This model of English informed by the literacy strategy could be done well or badly but could not be ignored. While researching the work of teachers in one New Zealand school, I noticed a much looser mix of practice across the work of the three English teachers, from lesson to lesson and teacher to teacher. This was a school untouched by the literacy strategy lesson structure and the mantra of objective-led teaching.

The teaching I saw was not necessarily better or worse for this but this structural model was not a constraint or a consideration in lesson design. I noticed that teachers in New Zealand have considerable freedom to choose texts (within the usual financial constraints on resources) and do not have to defer to a set list, although there are favourite texts. It was striking that the teachers in the research sample drew on a

considerable range of choices from New Zealand writing, both in their practice and in the references that they made to texts within the ecocritical reading sessions. All of the teachers were constrained by the demands of assessment pieces—a consideration that was uppermost in their planning—but it was notable to me that the NCEA allows considerable freedom in designing these assessment tasks. Teachers suggested that their main constraint lay in the difficulties that their students experienced in comprehension of texts and basic literacy. Students generally seemed to lack confidence in both oral, and written work – particularly in whole-class contexts. The teachers’ perceptions of what these students could achieve was a key factor in planning.

In the next section of this paper I will offer some reflections on instances of practice as a partial glimpse into broader trends and possibilities in New Zealand English in relation to ecocritical work. These instances are presented as connecting with three themes: the relative openness and freedom of the New Zealand curriculum; the myth of New Zealand’s environmental purity; and the historical and cultural struggle for belonging in New Zealand, expressed with forceful simplicity in the Māori phrase “tangata whenua” people of the land.

## STEPPING THROUGH THE OPEN DOOR

From the perspective of a teacher educator from the UK used to the national curriculum lists of set texts and the finely grained teaching objectives of the *Framework for Teaching English* (DfEE 2001) (with 98 objectives for students in their first year of secondary school English), the New Zealand national curriculum (2007) appears wide open. Paul Green<sup>3</sup>, a highly experienced English teacher and Deputy Principal is widely read in English and New Zealand literature as well as making significant use of digital resources found on You tube and the web. During the ecocritical reading group meetings he referred to a range of texts, introducing new works to the group as well as pursuing the reading leads that were offered by others. He was alert to texts that might connect with his students although he was highly concerned by questions of literary value and evaluated his selection of texts against his acute critical judgement of their worth. To me, he seemed curiously unencumbered in his planning by curricular or pedagogical constraints, pursuing a “rhizomatic” course of teaching a unit on food which covered a range of texts including: *The Omnivore’s Dilemma for Kids* (Pollan & Chevat, 2009), *Classic Combo* (Heatley, 2008) and the film *Samsara* (Fricke, 2011) and which incorporated interviews with organic farmers.

### A vignette

*It’s a hot day. Kayl is lying on the floor of the classroom and Paul, the teacher is ignoring him. Students are slumped about the room and all but one of them are Pasifika or Māori. On the desks there is some evidence that thinking happened here yesterday. It doesn’t look much like English though – a table representing notes about*

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<sup>3</sup> Teachers are named in the following accounts to credit their ecocritical work as co-researchers. This was part of the ethics approved by the University of Auckland. The classroom narratives are fictionalised to protect the identities of students whose real names and identifying features have been changed. The accounts have been validated by teachers as representative moments in their practice.

*“Food production before and after the Europeans came”. Of course now it’s all fries and MacDonalds – according to the students’ scribbled notes.*

*Paul talks the students into the lesson and reminds them about the school garden and how this work on food connects with that. He invites Meola, a teaching assistant, to speak. She is Māori and involved with local production on a small organic farm.*

*Students have nothing to ask but their faces are mostly turned to the speaker, listening. Paul asks questions and she talks about sustainable ways of living on the land linking this to cultural practices.*

*She takes the opportunity to tell them to eat their veggies and grow and cook their own food and eat healthy. I become impatient with the moral message and the representation of sustainability as an individual moral imperative (again). The students are listening, though, showing respect for the speaker and Kayl is sitting up on the floor leaning against the desk. But I challenge Meola that things have moved on – we can’t feed the world by turning hunter-gatherer. It’s too late for that. We talk about this for a minute or three, Paul, Meola and me – what can be done? How can change happen? Can we make changes ourselves?*

*The students say nothing and I worry about their involvement. Paul flicks on a clip from the film Samsara. It shows images of factory production of food. People in white blood-stained coats shoveling pieces of meat in a factory, hooks with endless pig carcasses moving along a train of miserable workers. At one point a machine is shown which sweeps live, yellow chicks into a conveyor belt. It looks like a giant vacuum cleaner and the chicks look tiny and fragile.*

*There are loud sounds of protest in the class. It is the first time I have seen these students visibly react to text. Anger. I feel it too – whatever we need to do to feed the world, to mass-produce food – it surely should not be this. Calmly, reassuringly, Paul asks the students to discuss their impressions and then to write about what this film shows us about the human food chain.*

*After the lesson, Paul seems satisfied but I am uneasy. “Paul, I could see that they reacted to that lesson but, I am wondering where we are going with this, I mean, was it English?” He looks surprised.*

*“Yes, it fits. They are focusing on the repercussions of the words and ideas.”*

*However, this seems more like social science to me. Paul asks me if I have any texts that might link with the lesson on the food production theme and I pass on a graphic cartoon Classic Combo, which shows the provenance of a meal of hamburger, fries and coke. We talk about the Omnivore’s Dilemma, which he read recently. I try to suggest the importance of the different forms of representation in all this – film, documentary, cartoon, literary non-fiction. I reflect that in the UK I would be trying to get the teachers to free up the technical analysis, to actually reference what the text says about the world, but in this lesson the message and response has been all important and Paul thinks that this is ok. He says, “I am constantly disturbed by how little so many of them know about the world. They don’t have much to go on. I am trying to give them some pointers, some facts. Something to work with.”*

*I trust his judgement – he is clearly developing something and most importantly, he believes in it.*

In this vignette it is possible to see that Paul as a teacher is comfortable with breaking the boundaries of English. This is a version of school English, which is comfortable with what might be seen in other contexts as disciplinary trespass (interdisciplinarity is a strong feature of ecocriticism). There were no straight lines in Paul's teaching. He followed up ideas as they arose although he had a plan in mind about the final assessment. He also drew on a very wide range of texts, both in his own planning and thinking and in terms of the variety introduced to students. He did not feel that every text required analysis; some were just there, background study, speaking or not speaking for themselves. His lessons confounded my expectations (based in UK classrooms) for a much more direct insistence on student participation and activity from the outset, as part of the mantra of what constitutes good practice. However, in this lesson, students had access to considered argument, they engaged emotionally with text and they were given the opportunity to verbalise and write their response. In the course of their unit of study, they engaged with a very wide range of texts and perspectives and they expressed keen interest in the work during the focus group discussion after the unit. In the UK I would expect to observe a similar group of below average attainment to have a much more restricted experience based on a narrow range of decontextualized extracts and literacy skill drilling and copying. To me, Paul's work reflected a primary concern with cultural and critical literacy. He did not seem dominated by a skills-based curriculum.

My observation of Paul's planning and teaching suggests that an ecocritical approach is possible, even with classes who need considerable support in making inferential readings and articulating opinions. The constraint is not from the curriculum but from the professional challenge of managing the complexity of ecocritical reading at this level and in translating this into classroom discussion and activity. In Paul's class students did not seem confident enough to take part in sustained, whole-class discussion of complex issues of food sustainability. But it may be the case that the process of observing this was valuable and fed into their later writing—certainly Paul felt that it did. Significantly, the only instance of sustainability as a school focus was a small school vegetable garden, screened from the main school thoroughfare, which was worked on by a small group of students whose academic ability was considered well below average. This secret garden had the potential to play a stronger role within the ethos of the school setting. Indeed, through working with an ecocritical focus, Paul began to make reference in his lessons to the presence of the garden in discussing the cultural texts around food—ecocritical pedagogy has been strongly rooted in making literary connections to real places (Christensen, Long & Waage 2008; Garrard, 2009).

Crucially, such cross curricular projects need to be related to work in learning areas, if they are to have credibility and criticality. English is well placed to be flexible enough to connect with sustainability projects from the perspectives of reportage and argument to the ways that literary and cultural texts represent related human endeavours and practices. Arguably, to work on a garden is an experiential process which requires (eco)critical framing to have any lasting impression.

## IMAGINING NEW ZEALAND'S ENVIRONMENTAL PURITY

I expected a readiness for environmental thinking in New Zealand. After all it is a country that prides itself on the representation of sublime landscapes (Werry, 2012). Yet this is a cultural imaginary that may be distant and unavailable to children growing up in the city suburbs of Auckland. In the following account of a lesson, the Head of English, Patricia Viger presents the New Zealand purity myth at face value:

### A vignette

*We enter the classroom to the sounds of native birds defined by the rising and bubbling notes of the tui. The screen projects images of native bush. Patricia begins with class business relating to punctuality, the class trip coming up and finally a review of the previous lesson. The ruru as a nocturnal bird and the fantail are suggested. The link to their poetry task is made clear in the technical term "onomatopoeia" written up on the board.*

*A clip of Frosty and the BMX kid (McLachlan, 2010) is played in which God comes to New Zealand in the form of a bearded old man. He refers to New Zealand as "my Eden". Having clarified the meanings of "Eden", Patricia draws out a contrast between what we might expect to find in Eden as paradise and what we might not expect, beginning with sounds and prompting for expressive adjectives, at the same time as suggestions are made by students.*

*The two lists on the board develop an opposition between the natural and the man-made: "Calm wind", "swaying trees", "running water", "splash of the river" set against "motorway noise", "other people", "machinery", "cell phones" and "motor trucks". Having run through the same procedure with sights, Patricia plays the advert for New Zealand tourism which has the famous slogan of "New Zealand 100% pure". Through recalling the list of images of iconic beauty with students, Patricia makes the implicit case that this advert is a representation of what we might expect to find in Eden. However, the explicit emphasis is on collating a list of words and phrases suitable for use in their own poems to be written later.*

This lesson explicitly draws on the dominant cultural imaginary of Aotearoa New Zealand as a pristine and unique natural environment. As an immigrant from Detroit, this perception of New Zealand's purity is close to Patricia's heart:

I grew up really in a concrete jungle and I moved to Aotearoa New Zealand...I've lived in a rural environment and I've lived in Auckland. But still people complain that it's not 100% pure, well it's not but compared to Europe or compared to the US it's so much greater in terms of what still remains of a natural healthy environment and it's worth preserving and worth acknowledging. (Interview Patricia Viger, March 20, 2012)

This cultural imaginary is strongly held against the competing awareness of environmental damage. This could be a source of strength, a deeply held belief that works to motivate environmental sensibility and awareness. Patricia, for instance, is a long-standing member of the Green Party and a keen advocate of the environment. However, it is a vision that can be at odds with the experience of city kids who live in the "urban" and "edgy" environment of South Auckland. One of the students

suggested that the place he felt happiest in was Auckland City rather than the vision of Eden that was being carefully constructed. For some students this cultural myth and pride in environmental richness had not yet touched their imaginations and might need to be articulated. The critical deconstruction of the myth might need to come later. In Patricia's lesson there were gestures towards this in a discussion of the use of kauri trees to build the city of San Francisco, which began to acknowledge an environment which has been radically altered by phases of human settlement. This gestures towards an understanding of how cities are built in, with, and on nature (Bennett & Teague, 1999). A focus on city environments is an important ecocritical development, which could have particular resonance for city children who need support to understand representations of their own environments as crucial to sustainability.

Clearly there is a tension at work within the lesson between the functional aim of collating and extending vocabulary for a class of students for whom English is a second language and the more indirect learning about the way that New Zealand is represented in two cultural texts. In this case the functional assignment aim seems dominant and the work on cultural representation is a backdrop – at the same time Patricia is clearly building what Stables (2003) has described as functional environmental literacy in the careful naming of natural elements. Patricia's aim to develop in city children a sense of awe and wonder about the natural world and to develop their environmental literacy was an ongoing theme within the broader plan. Part of the scheme of work involved a trip to the Waitakere Ranges, which was clearly a formative experience for students. Afterwards, one student talked at length to me about the issues of kauri dieback (a disease of an iconic native tree) and the importance of preserving these trees.

English can be a powerful subject for developing critique of the myths that rule our lives. The idea of myth is being used here in the sense of an ideological construct or story about how we live, which is taken for granted (Barthes, 1972). In this case the critique of New Zealand as 100% pure is not part of the teaching but there is no curricular or disciplinary reason for this not to occur. The decision to invoke the stereotype is a personal teaching decision based on an evaluation of the learning priorities of the class in that lesson, but also part of a commitment to present the natural world positively, as a source of strength, wonder and celebration. This is a strategic exclusion of negativity as well as an avoidance of complexity. Patricia is building the myth of New Zealand as a sublime natural environment and this may be stage one of an ecocritical journey.

Attending to ecological damage as represented or deliberately occluded within texts is a necessary part of ecocritical teaching (and would involve critique of the 100% pure myth). This raises the important issue of how far to address the negative and depressing aspects of environmental awareness within a school context. New Zealand offers incredible natural resources for developing in students a sense of "awe and wonder" and this is reflected in cultural texts which celebrate the natural environment of New Zealand and lament its destruction. These cultural texts are important resources for developing a critical awareness of environmental issues and they require careful negotiation and difficult pedagogical decisions.

## BECOMING TANGATA WHENUA

New Zealanders inherit a strong historical relationship to the land. This is also part of the nation's myth-making (Bell, 1996). Having a knowledge of the land was essential to survival, and this environmental knowledge was often hard won and linked with the right to belong to that land. The Māori relationship to the land is a source of environmental knowledge and identity that has been strongly represented as a deep obligation to guardianship (*kaitiakitanga*). As a corollary to this, the Pākehā (white settler) bond with nature and ownership of the land has been reframed as a new form of indigeneity within environmentalist discourse (King, 2004; Potts, Armstrong & Brown, 2013). Thus, the development of settler environmental knowledge and sensibility has been linked with a right to belong and to be seen as *tangata whenua*.

This sense of belonging can be insecure (King, 2004) and the sense of who has the right to belong is a deeply contested issue. This is particularly true of New Zealand's largest settlement: Auckland is a city of immigrants, many of them recent and many of them coming from very different home environments in the South Pacific, China, India and Europe to live in densely built suburbs, such as the intensive development in Flatbush which is notably restricted in green spaces. Developing a sense of the land, the natural world and the sustainable city environment urgently needs to be part of the experience of New Zealand children who may not all share the same grounding of environmental respect that is fundamental to the cultural myth about New Zealand society and culture.

An alternative perspective on the world is articulated through the strong influence of Māori values and culture and the recognition of these values in all spheres of public policy in accordance with the Treaty of Waitangi. The bi-cultural history of *Aotearoa* New Zealand may be very significant in developing an approach to English which honours the land as sacred and which challenges a dominant Western economic model of land as resources or "standing reserve" (Calder, 2011). Māori values about responsibilities and relationship to the land are represented in myths, stories, songs, art and dance and theatre. In a recent examination of the cultural significance of whales in *Aotearoa* New Zealand, a nuanced reading of the historical relationship of Māori to cetaceans reveals a multifaceted set of attitudes and practices, which include both exploitation *and* veneration. Armstrong (2013) makes a strong argument that in the process of anthologising and rewriting Māori whale creation myths, both Pākehā and Māori authors since the late 20th Century have chosen to emphasise their ecological significance and resonance, "because it seems to correspond with the ecological preoccupations of contemporary *Aotearoa* New Zealand and global thought" (p. 78).

Attitudes to whales as a "charismatic megafauna" are central to this argument, and are particularly resonant both in their presence within Māori creation stories, in relation to the whaling stations of early settlement, and in terms of current disputes over Japanese whaling in Southern waters.

This suggests the potential of work in English which seeks to explore the representational meaning of animals in relation to cultural and historical attitudes. In reading texts about whales, students could be analysing not just the textual structure but the structure of feeling around animals as ecological symbols and signs. One of

the texts that we worked on within our reading group meetings was “The Christening” by Simon Armitage (2010, p. 3), an English author. His poem is a multivoiced expression of the cultural uses and abuses of the real and representational whale held together by the satirical device of these conflicting positions being articulated through a whale’s monologue. We contrasted this with a reading of Australian poet Les Murray’s serious attempt to give presence and voice to the whale in “Spermaceti” (1993, p. 102). The question of “What do whales mean to our culture?” was part of the discussion of texts about whales, which intimately involves asking precise questions of textual form and purpose. The potential of whale stories included in anthologies such as *Legends of Aotearoa* (Winiata, 2001) offer the possibilities of exploration of historical Māori perspectives, while a text such *The Whale Rider* (Ihimaera, 1987) offers a nuanced rereading of legend in the light of social, cultural and environmental shifts.

The accommodation of Māori and environmentalist perspectives and the emphasis on Kaitiakitanga or guardianship as a strong tenet of Māori cultural belief offer a potential source of strength for an alternative and greener version of English. It gives credence and some power to a view which challenges the dominance of neoliberal enterprise and consumer culture. Ironically, this is a dynamic at work within the national curriculum documentation itself, which is full of glossy images of New Zealand scenery. A survey commissioned for the NZ Ministry of Education in 2005 argued that the values reflected in the New Zealand curriculum were fundamentally those of Western individualist economic values, a list which “does not include a strong value on nature, the earth or the environment” (Keown, Parker & Tiakiwai, 2005, p.14). This is in stark contrast to the values placed on nature, community and sustainability that the report identifies as enshrined within Māori culture. Moreover, analysis of the current national curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) suggests that enterprise is an increasingly dominant discourse over sustainability.

## CONCLUSION

My initial induction into New Zealand classrooms suggests to me that there is considerable freedom to teach a version of English beyond skills and competences and to draw on the resources of language and cultural texts to develop (eco)critical understanding of the world. Reading texts with a critical awareness of what they reveal about our dependent relationship to the more than human world in “natural” and built environments, as well as our relationships with each other, makes intellectual and contextual sense. It is simply odd to ignore how the pressure of environmental change impacts on us all as readers and creators of meaning. As Paul Green comments in relation to the ecocriticism project: “I think that it’s not even something that I would consciously regard as following up. I feel like it’s sort of embedded” (Interview, October 20, 2013).

Ecocriticism fits well with a range of features in place within New Zealand English. There are a range of ecocritical texts, the opportunities to make links between texts and place, access to beautiful natural environments, rich city spaces and an openness in the curriculum to support innovative and cross-curricular work and a consciousness of the environment that is readily available within the culture.

The potential for a distinct ecological vision of English in New Zealand is there. But its development will depend on negotiation with a number of competing forces which include: an emphasis on technical and technological skills; enterprise and competition in a global market; and a reduction of English to serve the development of functional literacy. Ecocritical reading works to interrogate these contradictions and tensions and could be a valuable counter to uncritical celebration of New Zealand as a natural wonderland untouched by the global issues of climate change and energy shortage within a carbon-based consumer culture.

Essential to developing an alternative and powerful vision of school English is the professional development of teachers, including practice in ecocritical reading. New Zealand's relatively young body of literature demands to be read ecocritically and this is a potential resource for an ecologically informed version of English. English in New Zealand is relatively free from the dominance of the English canon of texts. However, the absence of a settled tradition of texts for English argues for the need for greater critical work in reading (see, for example, Curnow, 1973). Central to ecocritical reading is the development of environmental identity and the gradual accumulation of environmental awareness and knowledge.

The nurturing and negotiation of children's understanding of personal and cultural identity is ingrained within notions of English and Arts in schools. Teachers' and children's personal and cultural identities are bound up with beliefs and histories about the relationship of humans, nature and environment. For New Zealand as a bi-cultural society, it would seem important to strengthen the value placed on nature and sustainability within the curriculum to reflect the Māori emphasis on these values and to equip *Aotearoa* New Zealand children to be *kaitiaki* (guardians) of the earth.

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