



## *Chameleon Vision*

### **Sustainability and English Studies**

**H**astily defined, *sustainability* means meeting today's needs without jeopardizing the well-being of future generations. Currently the word remains associated with academic disciplines like ecology, environmental studies, ecological economics, and planning, but soon the idea of sustainability will undoubtedly surface in a growing number of other academic departments. As it becomes increasingly impossible to ignore our escalating local and global environmental crises, and as the painful side effects of our consumer culture sink in further, educators in a number of fields will have to make room for sustainability in their teaching and in their research. Just as multiculturalism has shaped education in profound ways during the last two decades, I anticipate that sustainability—as a metaphor, a design problem, a cultural imperative, and a social and ecological necessity—will become one of the new paradigms shaping much of our work as teachers and scholars. If it doesn't, so much the worse for us.

From its inception, this book was written specifically for NCTE's Refiguring English Studies series. The language used to describe the objectives of this series is particularly apt when it comes to sustainability. For example, thinking sustainably requires that we envision ourselves less as autonomous individuals than as collaborators who are not only dependent upon but also literally connected to our local environments in complex ways. Because a curriculum of sustainability would have to be inherently holistic and cross-disciplinary, it would require not that we reject specialization per se but that we stop fetishizing specialization and stigmatizing the "generalist." And since an ethic of sustainability values an understanding of the degree to which we are

interconnected with our environs, it acknowledges degrees of interdependency between the “private” and the “public.” All of these objectives have echoes in the mission of the Refiguring English Studies series, which, as articulated in NCTE’s official series description (see page i of this book), “publishes historical work that considers the ways in which English Studies has constructed itself and its objects of study; investigations of the relationships among its constituent parts as conceived in both disciplinary and institutional terms; and examinations of the role the discipline has played or should play in the larger society and public policy.” An investigation of sustainability also forces us to rethink our jobs as professionals in English studies, thereby challenging (again in the words of the Refiguring series description) “our notions about how the written ‘work’ of English can or should be done.” And because sustainability requires us to be profoundly future-oriented—to anticipate the effects of contemporary actions on future conditions—sustainability-related discussions are appropriate for a series promoting “scholarship that considers the discipline’s possible futures.”

It comes as no surprise, then, that, even though neither the series per se nor any of the books it has published focuses explicitly on sustainability, some of the titles do focus on themes indirectly related to concerns of sustainability. Jed Rasula’s *The American Poetry Wax Museum* reveals the degree to which anthologies of American poetry have served as museums and greenhouses containing largely the same limited species, thereby rendering virtually a gamut of alternative and experimental writing commercially extinct. (One could compare reading an anthology of American poetry to buying produce and grain at the average supermarket, where one has little choice but to purchase the same limited varieties of apples, tomatoes, potatoes, and rice over and over again, even though thousands of different varieties of these foods exist.) In *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures: Refiguring College English Studies*, James Berlin emphasizes the significance of both the mediating job that English faculty have as gatekeepers and their transformative role as catalysts for “consciousness formation” (179). Michael Blitz and C. Mark Hurlbert’s *Letters for the Living: Teaching Writing in a Violent Age* and Charles M. Anderson and Marian M. MacCurdy’s *Writing and*

*Healing: Toward an Informed Practice* both address the role of English studies, particularly composition, in helping our students—so many of whom are at risk—survive. Where these volumes focus on preserving the welfare of our students, Stephen M. North et al.'s *Refiguring the Ph.D. in English Studies: Writing, Doctoral Education, and the Fusion-Based Curriculum* concludes that the only way left to resolve the crisis facing English studies is for faculty to reinvent their departments by moving outside the safety of their specializations, to bring “outsiders” into the department in order to further revitalize course offerings, and, most important, to let graduate students play a key role in reconstructing the nature of English studies on their own terms. At this early stage in the series, one already finds a preoccupation with extinction, survival, preservation, and reconstruction, all themes at the heart of sustainability.

The time is right for our conversations to address sustainability. Recent publications in composition and rhetoric have been moving in this direction, with examinations of the rhetoric of sustainability (Killingsworth and Palmer), environmental rhetoric (Herndl and Brown), environmental discourse and communication (Cantrill and Oravec), ecofeminism (McAndrew), nature writing and composition (Roorda, *Dramas* and “Sites”), postcolonialism and environmental pedagogy (Stephen Brown), and ecocomposition (Dobrin and Weisser, *Ecocomposition and Natural Discourse*; Dobrin and Keller). Yet despite this recent activity, English studies is decades behind other disciplines in recognizing the importance of considering our research and teaching in light of local and global environmental exigencies. There is still a pervasive, if unacknowledged, belief that much of our work ought to focus on the triad of race/class/gender, whereas “environment” remains a category awkwardly associated with largely “white,” middle-class values and geographies, and thus confined to the perimeters of our conversations.

Some of this is understandable. Attempts in the mid-1990s to establish ecocriticism and “green” cultural studies as legitimate fields—see *Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of Mind* (Kroeber), *Voices in the Wilderness: American Nature Writing and Environmental Politics* (Payne), and *The Ecocriticism Reader* (Glotfelty and Fromm)—were sometimes

criticized as too removed from the day-to-day realities of urban and suburban populations: “Nature writing and ecocriticism is a middle-class preserve” some argued, “attracting people who have the leisure and money to go out and enjoy nature” (Winkler A9).<sup>1</sup> But such critiques also reflect a missed opportunity. Instead of responding with impatience to recent eco-minded directions in scholarship as examples of bourgeois scholarship, a more useful direction would have been to further explore the ways in which feminism, multiculturalism, and environmentalism have always been bundled together, as feminist ecologists have repeatedly argued. Unfortunately, much of the literature of critical pedagogy—at least in English studies—has revolved around race, class, and gender without acknowledging that such sites of cultural conflict are so often matters of environmental injustice as well. The “environment,” after all, is a rubric that doesn’t just include “nature” (which, as suggested by Bill McKibben’s *The End of Nature*, is a precarious construct in itself, given the degree to which humans now shape, control, and define “nature”) but also suburban sprawl, the workplace, apartment buildings, strip malls, parking lots, highways, and campuses.

Because an understanding of sustainability requires an awareness of the interconnectedness of what are traditionally considered separate academic fields—ecology and economics, architecture and education, planning and sociology, philosophy and marketing, and so on—teachers who work in pedagogical zones where cross-disciplinary inquiry is encouraged have more leeway to design sustainability-focused pedagogies than do those in fields demanding greater specialization. This is where English studies, and especially composition studies, can play an influential role in imagining and developing curricula that promote awareness of sustainability.

I emphasize composition because in some respects I think it lies at the heart of English studies, or at least makes up one or two chambers of that heart. Obviously many who identify themselves with “English studies” proper—whether as literary theorists, cultural critics, historians, or century- or genre-specific scholars—will balk at this characterization. Compositionists like myself are, as Robert Scholes delicately puts it, still perceived as the ones doing “the shitwork” of English studies (35). But writing

is at the core of what English majors do, as Stephen North et al. have convincingly demonstrated, and writing courses, obviously, are where so much of this activity takes place in English curricula. Certainly composition courses remain the economic bread and butter of English departments, which rely on these courses to justify their relevance to the institution. But whether one casts composition as the core of English studies or as a necessary entry point into the discipline, I trust many will agree that composition occupies a significant portion of what constitutes English studies. In any case, in a manner reminiscent of James Berlin's consideration of the crisis of English studies from the perspective of someone working in the rhetoric branch of the discipline, I can, as a writing instructor, explore some of the larger global and local environmental crises confronting all of us through the eyes of undergraduates in my writing courses. The main difference here is that instead of focusing on the "crisis" of English studies as it has come to be defined throughout the 1990s, my overriding concern is how English studies, and particularly composition, might respond to a complex web of environmental crises and catastrophes threatening not just students in English courses, but all of society.

The composition instructor enjoys a kind of contextual freedom and disciplinary flexibility unknown to many of his or her colleagues. This is composition's little secret. Certainly writing teachers still suffer from a secondary status compared to their colleagues who specialize in literature, theory, and cultural studies; they are expected to do more work (all those papers, week after week), and without adequate compensation, especially for the serfs (adjuncts and graduate assistants) but also for full-time faculty members whose work in composition makes them less eligible for a variety of grants reserved for those who work in the loftier realms of English studies. But while teaching composition is as labor intensive as any teaching in higher education, the writing instructor has more leverage for encouraging students to explore a variety of themes and experiences than do those who teach in more specialized areas. Not only do compositionists and their students inject material into courses that other colleagues and their students can't address, but also they can orchestrate zones of inquiry that juxtapose eclectic webs of information,

inspiration, and provocation, the likes of which can't easily be generated elsewhere in academe. Faculty who teach "disciplinized" courses—Advanced Commercial Computing, Basic Thermodynamics, Introduction to Urban Transport Planning, the Irish Novel, Judicial Process and Behavior, South Asian Society—do their work in classes where students simply have less opportunity to talk and write about the kinds of things that students pull into composition courses: date rape, suburban ennui, farm life in Mexico, drive-by shootings, traffic congestion, a grandmother's childhood in Beijing—all subjects which can easily surface within the same classroom, even in the same week. In a course on Milton or macroeconomics, "Milton" and "macroeconomics" have, like interior decorators, already entered the classroom space before the semester has begun, predetermining to some extent the landscape of the classroom, or at least one's methods of negotiating that landscape, no matter how much that conceptual nucleus gets deconstructed and contested throughout the course. While no course is a *tabula rasa*—like any classroom environment, the territory of the writing workspace is shaped by a host of ideological impulses swirling around the professor, the institution, the students, the local region, and other involved parties—students in composition classes play an obviously greater role in that interior decorating, and the conversations cannot help but be more variegated and more unexpected—and often riskier—than in so many other classrooms beholden to the parameters of some predetermined subject.

Because of this flexibility, and because most students take these courses during the first year of college, the inherently cross-disciplinary composition course can serve as an introductory arena where students begin to view their personal and academic needs and desires through the lens of sustainability. In this sense, we can envision composition studies as environmental studies—not as an offshoot of ecology but as the study of one's immediate and future environs (city blocks, mall parking lots, backyards, office cubicles, apartment buildings, crowded highways) so that students might explore how their identities have been composed by such places and vice versa. This approach conceives the writing workspace as a place for students to explore what they consider

right and what wrong about where they work and where they live; a site for thinking about the cultures and families that matter to them, and how to preserve the stories and the languages that belong to them; and an arena for thinking about one's needs and desires (and the fundamental differences between these two concepts) in conjunction with possible future careers. Composition studies can thus be reconceptualized as a disciplinary vehicle that, in developing the intellectual and cultural arts of writing, reading, and talking, promotes sustainability-conscious thinking. And, in cases where the fruits of such courses—the students' writings—are published in print or online journals, books, and newsletters, the composition classroom offers a means by which student testimonies can catch the attention of other faculty, administrators, and even the public. In this way, composition becomes a different kind of "service" discipline, serving as a reminder of the conditions of our students' neighborhoods, jobs, and cultures, as well as an indication of their hopes and fears for the future. Composition would then serve students by providing a writing workspace where they could grow as writers and readers, and it would also serve the larger academic and public realms by making available student testimonies about their environments.

For me the challenge becomes how to create a classroom environment where students have the freedom to pursue writing projects that matter to them, and yet where, as an instructor, I not only remain energized by their questions and pursuits but also consider the ongoing conversations to be of paramount importance to my students' short- and long-term survival. If the writing teacher has the power to make students write and read about practically anything, what then are the most important things for them to write and read? Of all the information available to them, what is absolutely crucial to their intellectual, spiritual, economic, and physical survival? Of all the possible writing assignments one can come up with, which ones will have the greatest effect on their lives? From this perspective the writing classroom becomes a course in local, necessary knowledge—a thumbnail sketch revealing not only what that teacher deems important for students of writing, but also what the teacher and students consider most important, period.

## Chameleon Vision

If this book were to have a mascot, it might be the chameleon, for two reasons. The more obvious reason is that the chameleon's unique skin enables it to blend in with its surroundings, although, apparently, these color changes have less to do with camouflage than with communicating with other chameleons and indicating the animal's body temperature and health. Still, the image of the chameleon "becoming one" with its local environment is an attractive one for a book like this, which argues that learning how to live sustainably ought to be our primary cultural concern and, as such, must play a central role within our curricula. Fluctuating external conditions trigger within the chameleon the release of hormones that in turn modify magical things in its remarkable skin called chromatophores, thereby allowing the animal to harmonize with its surroundings. We, on the other hand, take our environs for granted, and our ignorance is killing us: physically, emotionally, culturally, economically. Clearly we need to pay more attention to how external or "outside" conditions are never really completely outside us at all, but inextricably woven into our own health and behavior. If we could turn chameleon, and our bodies reflected the status of our watersheds, energy resources, topsoil, climate changes, food supplies, transportation systems, workplaces, neighborhoods, community networks, and global markets, what would we see looking back at us in the mirror?

The other reason for invoking the chameleon is its spectacular kind of eyes, which are even more entrancing than its shifting color. A chameleon's independently rotating eyes allow it to look in two directions at once. The effect is both mesmerizing and a little creepy, as if two separate brains were housed inside that tiny head, each one operating its own little periscope. Does the animal see in split-screen? Or are the separate images somehow fused? Other creatures possess equally bizarre visual equipment—for example, the cluster eyes of spiders; the compound eyes of various insects; and the divided eyes of the Anableps fish, which enable it to see simultaneously above and below the waterline—but the mechanically separate eyes of the chameleon, when not working in tandem to zero in on an unsuspecting bug, can literally look forward and backward at the same time. To me they

invoke a metaphor for gazing simultaneously into two very different futures.

Increasingly I find myself thinking in chameleon vision. One “eye” belongs to that of the father, the husband, the teacher. It is an optimistic eye preoccupied with figuring out ways of enriching the lives of my family and my students. It is driven less by naïveté (I hope) than by hopeful pragmatism. This eye is unabashedly committed to imagining and creating, as awkward as this sounds, something like a better future for the people it encounters on a daily basis—family, friends, and students. While this eye is fully aware of the seriousness of our various environmental crises, it seeks to maintain a constructive optimism in the face of such news. Clearly it’s an eye the likes of which informs other recent titles: Alan AtKisson’s *Believing Cassandra: An Optimist Looks at a Pessimist’s World*; Paul Hawken’s *The Ecology of Commerce: A Declaration of Sustainability*; Hawken’s subsequent book *Natural Capitalism: Creating the Next Industrial Revolution*, written with Amory Lovins and L. Hunter Lovins; and even, despite the title, Mark Dowie’s *Losing Ground: American Environmentalism at the Close of the Twentieth Century*.

The second eye, though, is a more pessimistic eye, a nervous and increasingly frightened eye—not so much cynical (I hope) as darkly pragmatic. It is an eye which, the more it regards current trends, arrives at unsettling conclusions that literally cause me to lie awake some nights and fear for my son’s future. Plenty of other writers view their work through this eye as well: Robert Kaplan’s *The Coming Anarchy: Shattering the Dreams of the Post Cold War*; Eugene Linden’s *The Future in Plain Sight: Nine Clues to the Coming Instability*; and Graham Lyons, Evonne Moore, and Joseph Wayne Smith’s *Is the End Nigh? Internationalism, Global Chaos and the Destruction of the Earth*. Even scholars committed to building a sustainable society have moments when their fears are revealed: Edward and Jean Stead, in the closing of their otherwise optimistic *Management for a Small Planet*, admit that “the idea that economic man will ever willingly surrender his quest for castles and gold so that people he will never know can have a comfortable place to live in a safe society with clean air to breath [sic], adequate soil for food, clean water to drink, and the opportunity for creative self-expression is essentially

ludicrous within the current framework of the materialistic, ego-centered, growth-oriented, mechanical, mental models that are currently driving human thought processes” (238).

Perhaps I should have written this as two books contained within the same binding, like a child’s flip-over book. One side would have been written from the optimistic eye; turn the book upside down and flip it over, and there would be the darker version. Neither story would take precedence over the other: in the center of the book would be a blank page, where the reader would be expected to synthesize the two halves on his or her own terms. Does one view both futures in split-screen? Fuse them together? As sensible as a structure like this seems to me, editors and readers would surely have found it too gimmicky, unbecoming for a book aimed at an audience of teachers and academics who understandably expect the works they read to have been written by authors who have made up their minds. And so I have settled for writing mostly in the first eye. The result is a largely optimistic book written from the point of view of a teacher who needs to believe that there is still time for academics to address sustainability within their courses and institutions in order to help effect necessary change.

This might be the riskiest claim in the entire book. There are many who will argue—and on my “dark eye” days I am one of them—that change happens far too slowly in academe for it to ever have any profound impact on something so enormous as creating a sustainable culture. For one thing, colleges and universities, even when we take into consideration the growing number that have made major strides in greening their campuses, are poor models of behavior. Studies like Sara Hammond Creighton’s *Greening the Ivory Tower: Improving the Environmental Track Record of Universities, Colleges, and Other Institutions* are of obvious importance, for they show us how conscientious institutions like Tufts University, Brown University, Ball State University, Georgetown University, the University of Vermont, and the University of Wisconsin serve as models for innovative and systemic environmental stewardship (see too Eagan and Orr’s *The Campus and Environmental Responsibility*; Filho’s *Sustainability and University Life*; Keniry’s *Ecodemia*; and April Smith’s *Campus Ecology*). But most academic institutions still lack the vision

and the commitment to convert their operations into sustainable ones. Academic institutions everywhere are undermining their own missions by eliminating tenure-track faculty lines. When administrations are so hell-bent on cutting corners by replacing long-term, full-time faculty with part-time faculty, how serious could they possibly be when it comes to fostering ongoing environmental stewardship on campus—especially when the success of such stewardship depends in large part on the presence of an active, committed, and institutionally supported full-time faculty?

But the problems are considerably larger than academia's failure at taking sustainability seriously. There is ample evidence to support the belief that our various global environmental crises are of such enormity, and that so much damage has occurred already, that sustainability itself might be a romantic if not impossible concept. Before I explain my own reasons for holding onto the concept of sustainability, and my decision as an educator to continue viewing my work through a largely optimistic lens, it's important to pause and consider some of the reasons why such optimism is in conflict with available evidence.

### **The Sad Lens: Synthesizing Bad News**

Were this like a number of titles in environmental education, sustainable business, and ecological economics, this is the part of the book where I would insert a litany of statistics illustrating the depths of our environmental crises. Part preamble and part elegy comprised of what Herman Daly and John Cobb call "wild facts" (1), such lists are common if not obligatory in much environmentally oriented literature. These gloomy inventories of global bad news attempt to grab one's attention and establish motive, justifying the inevitable sense of urgency running throughout the remaining argument. But while a desire to stir the audience with startling statistics highlighting the horrors of contemporary ecocide is understandable, these preambles can come across more as requiem than as call to action. We have all heard bad news like this before, and, even though the bad news keeps getting worse, we become immune to cited examples of worldwide environmental devastation. Not that it isn't necessary to make these

invocations, if only for testimonial purposes; I too have collected my own catalog of “wild facts” and assembled them in Appendix A, if for no other reason than to catalog the kind of information that prompted me to write this book. For now, though, I will limit myself to three examples that should illustrate why, when we look into the future, things can look very bad.

1. For approaching twenty years, the Worldwatch Institute has released its annual State of the World progress reports. In the *State of the World 1989*, reference was made to the upcoming 1990s as a “turnaround decade,” citing scientists who believed that the future of the environment would depend on what would and would not happen in the 1990s (Brown et al. 192). The *State of the World 1989* concludes with this: “By the end of the next decade, the die will pretty well be cast. As the world enters the twenty-first century, the community of nations either will have rallied and turned back the threatening trends, or environmental deterioration and social disintegration will be feeding on each other” (194). Later, in a 1991 publication, Lester Brown, director of the Worldwatch Institute, wrote, “If all these trends I’ve been describing are still going on at the end of the next decade [the 1990s], then I think the social disintegration and environmental deterioration will be feeding on each other on a growing scale” (“Battle” 182). Words like this might remind some of the incendiary rhetoric associated with more radical environmental organizations, like Earth First! But Lester Brown’s work as a global educator is widely respected. The language of the Worldwatch Institute’s annual planetary checkups in the widely translated State of the World reports has been praised for its “studious omission of overt scare tactics like the lurid apocalyptic narratives we have seen in the popular press” (Killingsworth and Palmer 264).

Nor was Brown alone in making such claims. Others argued that we were looking ahead to likely “overshoot and collapse” (i.e., to the point where populations increase beyond their region’s carrying capacity, which results in “correction factors” such as disease, war, and extinction). Among the world’s poorest nations there would be continued hyperbolic population growth, resulting in depletion of already strained resources beyond natural limits and leading in turn to widespread starvation, while the rest of us

could expect to witness “decline: first, in the intangible qualities of life (like peace, quiet, access to fresh air, drinkable streams and unspoiled landscapes), [and] later in material standards (i.e. per capita availability of consumer goods and services)” (Randers 23). David Orr expressed the same message this way: “The decisions about how or whether life will be lived in the next century are being made now. We have a decade or two in which we must make unprecedented changes in the way we relate to each other and to nature” (*Ecological Literacy* 3).

The implications of such deadlines are particularly humbling for teachers. Because time is so short, one might conclude that those of us charged with teaching the next generation how to live sustainably are inconsequential. Here is yet another of Lester Brown’s claims, stated after a lecture: “We don’t have time to train a generation of teachers, who would train a generation of students, who a generation later will become decision-makers. That’s not an option any more. The changes have to come within a matter of years among those of us who are already making decisions” (“Battle” 186).

Everyone knows by now that the turnaround decade didn’t. In fact, it did quite the opposite. Beginning in 1994, the 1990s witnessed a sustained period of go-go growth that didn’t stop until March 2000, thus constituting the longest expansion ever on record. A great many benefited from this extraordinary productivity: we saw the lowest unemployment in generations, an increase in real wage growth, significantly increased business investments, and the meteoric rise of the stock market. But when looked at from the point of reigning in our use of limited resources and adopting simpler lifestyles in accordance with the goals of sustainability, the exuberant growth of the 1990s was exactly the opposite of what organizations like the Worldwatch Institute were hoping to see. The situation in 1989 was dire enough; by the end of the 1990s it was profoundly worse.

2. In 1992 the Union of Concerned Scientists issued a document titled “World Scientists’ Warning to Humanity” that opened with these words: “Human beings and the natural world are on a collision course. Human activities inflict harsh and often irreversible damage on the environment and on critical resources. If not

checked, many of our current practices put at serious risk the future that we wish for human society and the plant and animal kingdoms, and may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know. Fundamental changes are urgent if we are to avoid the collision our present course will bring about.”

More than fifteen hundred academics signed this document: chemists, physicists, geologists, epidemiologists, computer scientists, biochemists, meteorologists, agricultural scientists, mathematicians, astronomers, geneticists, pediatricians, economists, oceanographers, engineers, psychologists, ecologists, endocrinologists, anthropologists, geophysicists, limnologists, oncologists, neurologists, neurobiologists, physiologists, botanists, entomologists, embryologists, hematologists, physicians, and zoologists. Many of these were Nobel laureates.<sup>2</sup> While lists of names and an impressive array of methodically reasoned arguments by authorities certainly don’t prove that civilization as we know it might indeed end shortly—Gregory Bateson reminds us that “science never proves anything” (*Mind and Nature* 27–30)—the concern expressed in such a document is profound. (One finds a similar sense of fear running through more recent public documents, such as *GEO-1*, the United Nations Environment Programme’s Global State of the Environment Report 1997.)

When fifteen hundred scientists publicly express their collective fear that our consumer society, if left unchecked, is doomed, this is news. When the ensuing seven years after the release of the report bring record-setting levels of worldwide material production and economic expansion—far beyond current levels at the time this document was written—it is even bigger news.

3. In 1997 Jay Hanson, a retired systems analyst living in Hawaii, started building a Web site: [www.dieoff.org](http://www.dieoff.org). It is an archive of more than 150 articles and essays, most of them reprints of articles and book chapters that Hanson has collected under such categories as economic theory, population, climate change, carrying capacity, and sustainability. Perhaps the most important piece of Hanson’s site is a compilation of papers catalogued under the heading “fossilgate.” According to the experts in petroleum geology whose work Hanson has reprinted (Colin Campbell,

Brian Fleay, Jean Laherrère, Walter Youngquist, and others), the most pressing issue facing humanity, more pressing even than climate change or population growth, is an impending oil crisis that will lead to nothing less than global economic decline. Based on findings gathered in the 1990s—most notably in Colin Campbell’s *The Coming Oil Crisis* and Campbell and Laherrère’s landmark article in *Scientific American*, “The End of Cheap Oil”—world petroleum output is expected to peak sometime late in the first decade of this century, after which the cost of extracting oil will continue to rise, and rise, and rise, in turn triggering chronic global economic decline. The issue is not that the world will run out of oil, but rather that the world will run out of *cheap* oil, which of course drives the global economy. Once we have used more than half of available reserves—which, according to current research, could happen anywhere between 2005 and 2010 (and production of cheap oil outside the Persian Gulf is already peaking in 2000–2001 [see Fleay])—we enter a radically new world, one where none of us can ever again take fossil fuel for granted. Nor will we be able to simply convert en masse to alternative energy resources, as the research, development, and dissemination of alternative energy technologies such as fuel cells, photovoltaics, and wind turbines will for some time continue to rely on fossil fuel. As I write this, the implications of the impending oil crisis are being considered on two active discussion lists, “energyresources” and “runningonempty,” both of which are offshoots of Hanson’s dieoff site.<sup>3</sup> At energyresources, one finds petroleum geologists, engineers, systems analysts, and ecologists examining recent research and news reports about the impending oil crisis; the discussions at runningonempty revolve around strategies for alerting an as of yet uninterested media, as well as suggestions for surviving after the crisis hits.

Of course, apocalyptic and dystopian dreams thrive on the Internet, from Y2K survival sites, which appear now as virtual relics from a forgotten age, to goofy organizations like the Earth Changes movement, which believes that polar shifts will soon cause the continents to alter and much of civilization to fall into the sea (according to their prophecies, Long Island, where I live, should already have disappeared under water). But Hanson’s dieoff site, despite its initial sensationalism (several graphic photographs

of dead infants practically dare visitors to stay away), is a compendium of information originally written by scholars for peer-reviewed journals and presses. What's most amazing about the dieoff site is that, despite the recent appearance of other sources of related material—see, for example, [www.hubbertpeak.com](http://www.hubbertpeak.com) (M. King Hubbert, a petroleum geologist, created a bell curve forecasting petroleum production and depletion)—almost no one, as of this writing, seems interested in discussing this information. Neither the mainstream nor the alternative media, and neither politicians nor academics, seem aware of the possibility of global economic decline beginning in less than ten years. Sooner or later, though, if these scientists are right, the end of cheap oil will alter our lives in ways that few of us are ready to comprehend.

By this point some readers will be wondering why I have put such stock in arguments about coming environmental catastrophes without acknowledging dissenting views, of which there are many. The reason that I will not spend time in this book giving equal due to those on the flip side of other so-called environmental debates is this: the arguments I have read by greenhouse skeptics and environmental critics are for the most part unsupported arguments, and not infrequently outright lies, by writers who cannot publish in peer-reviewed arenas, and whose work is largely funded by political interest groups wishing to discredit environmental organizations for their own political gain. In some cases the conservative political agenda shaping such work is obvious, as in Peter Huber's *Hard Green: Saving the Environment from the Environmentalists: A Conservative Manifesto*, an example of the kind of unsubstantiated “research” frequently found in such anti-environmental “correctives” (Huber is a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, as well as a columnist for *Forbes*). Sometimes such “alternative” environmental critiques are thinly disguised examples of “greenwashing”; thus Jonathan H. Adler's progressively titled *Environmentalism at the Crossroads: Green Activism in America* is in fact written by someone who works for the Competitive Enterprise Institute, an anti-environmental think tank. In *Facts, Not Fear: A Parent's Guide to Teaching Children about the Environment* by Michael Sanera and Jane S. Shaw, one notices that the introduction is written by Marilyn Quayle. As

Brian Tokar reminds us in *Earth for Sale: Reclaiming Ecology in the Age of Corporate Greenwash*, it was of course Quayle's infamous husband who, in overseeing the Council on Competitiveness when he was Vice President, sought to remove wetlands protections in twenty-nine states, change the Clean Air Act to enable utilities to remain in control of their own air emissions permits, halt a ban on incineration of lead batteries, eliminate proposed quality control standards for medical labs, and subvert biotechnology regulations (63–64). Some of the anti-environmentalist propaganda available is blatantly absurd, like Norman Myers and Julian L. Simon's *Scarcity or Abundance: A Debate on the Environment*, in which the authors state that "we now have in our hands . . . the technology to feed, clothe, and supply energy to an ever-growing population for the next 7 billion years," an obviously groundless claim that is nevertheless taken seriously and painstakingly refuted in Paul and Anne Ehrlich's examination of the anti-science rhetoric of "wise use" policies, "greenscamming," and "brownslashing" (*Betrayal* 66–67, 100–104).<sup>4</sup>

Still, lies such as those proffered by writers like Dixy Lee Ray and Lou Guzzo are frequently cited.<sup>5</sup> In *Environmental Overkill: Whatever Happened to Common Sense?* Ray and Guzzo claim that "for every assertion made by a reputable scientific expert that the world is warming up, there is another one from an equally qualified scientist who says that it is not" (13). It is important to realize the depth of this particular untruth. In 1995 several thousand scientists on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) concluded that global warming—climate change, as it is more accurately known—is not just a theory but a fact; in 2000 the IPCC went so far as to conclude that much of this climate change is the result of the burning of fossil fuels (Revkin, "Shift"). On the other side of the issue, there are approximately two dozen frequently cited greenhouse skeptics who maintain that evidence of climate change is inconclusive. Thus the ratio of those who view climate change as fact to those who do not is more than 100 to 1. What's more, some of the more vocal opponents of climate change—those whom writers like Ray and Guzzo tend to cite—have been funded by the petroleum industry, the same trillion-dollar industry that once circulated a "scientific petition"

formatted to resemble a reprint from the journal for the National Academy of Sciences and that not only opposed the global climate change accord but also proclaimed that increased levels in carbon dioxide are beneficial (Park). The questionable research marshaled by such skeptics has been discredited by other scientists as scientifically unfit to appear in peer-reviewed journals, as documented in Ross Gelbspan's *The Heat Is On: The High Stakes Battle over Earth's Threatened Climate* (202).<sup>6</sup>

The evidence that we are in dire straits when it comes to rapidly diminishing energy resources, climate change, mass extinctions, topsoil depletion, rising sprawl and development, and environmental injustice is embarrassingly and overwhelmingly obvious. (For more evidence, see Appendix A.)

## The Optimistic Eye: Visualizing Path B

Given the news currently available, then, why have I devoted such time to writing a book aimed at sparking awareness when, after reading conversations like those on the runningonempty discussion list, it would seem that the more important teaching these days is happening not in academia but in places like Tom Brown's Tracking, Nature, and Wilderness Survival School or do-it-yourself sustainable home design schools such as the Earthwood Building School (Roy)? I don't have an easy answer to this. To be sure—and this will probably sound irresponsible to more than a few readers—there are days when I think that introductory courses in biointensive gardening, permaculture, off-grid living, and techniques for community networking would be a far more effective use of time than the majority of core college courses currently being taught, including those in English departments.

So why all this time spent on gathering student testimonies to fuel an argument for sustainability-focused curricular reform? Because, as corny and self-serving as it might sound, I don't want to let my students (or my son) down. I still feel a responsibility to try and figure out this problem of how to imagine and design a sustainable culture, and how to let those goals take form, directly and indirectly, within one's classes and throughout the curriculum. There really is no other choice. The remaining options

—to leave sustainability up to other courses and other disciplines because it’s “not our business,” or to refuse to design a pedagogy of sustainability since things already look so bleak, and, after all, what can just one English instructor possibly do anyway?—are pure cynicism, that is, expressions of what Peter Sloterdijk calls “enlightened false consciousness” (5). And, in the end, such gestures are uninteresting, because they are so predictable. Perhaps the most radical decision that educators can make, then, both pedagogically and artistically, is to remain convinced that they and their students can literally reconstruct their local worlds for the better.

In *Earth at a Crossroads: Paths to a Sustainable Future*, Hartmut Bossel creates two future scenarios: “Path A,” the route we will take if current trends persist, and “Path B,” a vision of a sustainable world. In the Path A scenario,

the curricula of the transnational college industry are dominated by the developing “global culture” with major foundations in Anglo-American culture and tradition, and the values of competitive, globalized society. The contributions of other cultures disappear from these curricula and the libraries, and are eventually forgotten. . . . As curricula (and cultures) are standardized world-wide, there is little incentive for studying in other regions. First-hand knowledge of other countries, cultures, and languages becomes rare. Second-hand knowledge, as interpreted by the information industry, determines personal experience and development. . . .

The educational system degenerates to a supplier of professional training, where educational content is determined by the commercial interests of business and industry. This system does not educate for excellence of scientific or cultural achievements. The level of general education declines as professional specialization and subjects of trivial culture dominate. (124–25)

The sustainable Path B scenario is radically different. Local cultures are emphasized within the curriculum. Intercultural student exchange is facilitated in ways that lead “to an understanding of the dynamics of change and development, and of the significance of diversity and sustainability,” and the curriculum is inherently interdisciplinary, flexible, and directed toward individual student needs (136). Bossel advocates the following choice:

I think the correct conclusions under current conditions are: (a) “Ecological and social sustainability of human society face serious and increasing threats,” and (b) “We have the means and the obligation to turn things around and get on a sustainable path while we still can.” With such an attitude, you look at the situation realistically and do your part to change it. (305)

Bossel’s Path B is the obvious choice; ultimately, his conclusion must be our own as well.

# NOTES

## Chapter One

1. For a critique of the "whiteness" of ecocriticism, see Carl Anthony's interview with Theodore Roszak, in which Anthony critiques the Eurocentric biases embedded in the assumptions of some deep ecologists. In responding to Aldo Leopold's claim that people think like mountains, Anthony responds, "Why is it so easy for these [white] people to think like mountains and not be able to think like people of color?" (Anthony 273)
2. This is not to say that one should infer any inherent connection between winning a Nobel Prize and having a clue about environmental stewardship. In her attempt to find out what the world's most famous economists have to say regarding the environment, Carla Ravaioli reveals a stunning lack of environmental awareness among many internationally famous economists. In particular, see part of an interview with Milton Friedman (Ravaioli 63-65).
3. As of this writing, both groups can be found at <http://groups.yahoo.com/>.
4. See too Edward Flattau's *Tracking the Charlatans: An Environmental Columnist's Refutational Handbook for the Propaganda Wars*.
5. Unfortunately, writers like Ray and Guzzo find their way into "green readers" used in writing courses. Consider how, even though the collection clearly seeks to instill a strong environmentalist ethic in students, the editor of *Reading the Environment* (Walker) has seen fit to insert among her otherwise "green" selections two irresponsibly deceptive pieces of propaganda: William Booth's "So What If It's Getting Hot?" and Ray and Guzzo's "Environmentalism and the Future." The former is a brief editorial that dismisses global warming as a lie perpetuated by "eco-technocrats" and argues that even if the temperature does rise, humans will be the better for it. The latter is typical of Ray and Guzzo's method of arguing without evidence: they claim that "environmentalism" "incorporates a strongly negative element of anti-development, anti-progress, anti-technological, anti-business, anti-established institutions, and, above all, anti-capitalism. Its positive side, if that is what it can be called, is that it seeks development of a society totally devoid of industry and technology" (qtd. in Walker 531-32). It's not so much that the editor of this reader has chosen to include such examples of wrongheaded writing within the anthology, but that students who encounter these texts have no immediate way to gauge the degree to which these authors are manipulating readers through the distortion and absence of evidence. No questions accompany these two selections; their presence in the anthology implicitly casts them as neither more nor less authoritative than the other selections. An example of a reader where similar texts are presented within a more critical context is Anderson and Runciman's *A Forest of Voices*, in which the editors encourage readers to actively question the claims raised in an article by Dixy Lee Ray and "be aware of the political orientation of the publications you look at": "In the end, draw some tentative conclusions about the nature of 'scientific fact' and the relationship of facts and politics" (567). Jenseth and Lotto take a similar tack in including P.J. O'Rourke's "The Greenhouse Affect" in their reader *Constructing Nature*: "Even though we may not agree with the message behind some humor, often the humor itself allows us to understand a different perspective" (426).
6. Gelbspan's harsh criticism of the greenhouse skeptics is supported by Paul Epstein of the Center for Health and the Global Environment at Harvard Medical School, whose research explores the relationship between global climatic changes and the rise of new infectious diseases (Patz et al.; Epstein "Ecosystem"). Epstein states that there are about six scientists left who seriously debate the reality of global warming, only one or two of whom are able to publish in refereed journals (Epstein "Emerging" ). Similarly, Gail E. Christianson writes, "Few of [the greenhouse skeptics'] papers have been placed in respected scientific journals, where all articles are subject to intense peer review. Instead, they pen short books that are published by the ideologically driven think tanks to which they belong."