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Reviewer Biography

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Place, Being, Resonance: A Critical Ecohermeneutic Approach to Education

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Reviewed by David Wright, Western Sydney University, NSW, Australia

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The premises of this study are profound: they call up absorbed conversation, but more than anything, they demand experience. These are known best ontologically, in relationship to the world of nature and the social networks that we inhabit in our relationship with nature. In this respect, criticality is a perspective informed by disempowerment; hermeneutics is informed by deeply sensed participation in the construction of knowledge. The translation between these forms of encounter and their reportage, like that between ontology and epistemology, is necessarily interpretative. Here, language becomes a fluid method for the nomination and communication of understanding. And many have sought to communicate in this way. Numerous theses have been written to capture phenomenal experience through summative explanation. This is another. It is a powerful thesis informed by a deep reading of major authors in the field. It is an interdisciplinary work that draws on poets, eco-psychologists, eco-feminists, scholars of Indigenous experience, environmental educators and major theorists in critical inquiry, hermeneutics, and phenomenology. The goal is a curriculum that includes 'engendering a deep and participatory understanding of place; recognising and revitalising oral traditions; focusing on interpretive and experiential inquiry with an emphasis upon story telling; and connecting to ecojustice frameworks to analyse the linguistic dimension of the ecological crisis ...' (p. 57).

Considerable attention is devoted in this volume to addressing what a critical ecohermeneutic approach to education is. This is done through reference to key writers. Each are used, variously, to legitimise and entrench the approach. Very early, the author describes his tremulous approach to his subject: 'Here, walking a boreal forest path with

a group of students … a question emerges from rotting leaves and moss …' (p. 2). And, 'in the classroom, questions tend to be a little more clearcut … And yet, even here, mycelial moments emerge to stop us in our tracks' (p. 3). For this is an absorbed study. It is a rich and often poetic rendering of knowledge acquired through experience. The humus of language is cultivated. 'Good educators, like good hermeneutic philosophers and good poets … must cultivate in themselves and in their students, a sense of the *living interpretability of the world*' (italics in original; pp. 3–4). The pursuit of position and perspective continues through the book, and the questions continue to be asked: 'What does it mean to return education towards the nourishing interconnections of earthly life?' (p. 15). 'What does an ecopoetic understanding of education really mean for teaching on the ground?' (p. 37). 'How do we move from walks in the park towards a pedagogy that co-teaches with place?' (p. 91). Finally, the author puts these questions in context. In doing so, he identifies one of the more frustrating aspects of the volume. He writes, '… beyond the verbose theorising, ecohermeneutics is more like coming to recognise the pedagogic significance of a fistful of red maple leaves, an amanita on the path, a little jar of stones — to hear the questions properly. Not yours, a world's.' (p. 134). For this is too often a work of verbose theorising. As a reader, I found the ongoing desire to legitimise perspective through reference to other writers working in this space (and an ongoing desire to differentiate this work from theirs) frustrating. As a reader, it almost defeated me. While I was impressed by the author's depth of engagement with literature that could be described as critical or ecohermeneutic (in his conversation with the earth), I was equally interested in the contribution of the author's reading and experience of place, being, resonance in relation to education. Here, I felt less than nourished. The issue is mentioned for its importance, but little is done to bring it to light. No stories of experience (which I find very strange, given that the author is a leading exponent of educating in and through the wild), minimal discussion of teaching and learning, nothing on curriculum. And while these may be seen as tedious and prosaic when pitted against the deeply engaged search for meaning in the rotting leaves and moss of ecohermeneutic and ecopoetic understanding, they remain issues of significance for likely readers of this book.

These problems may arise from ways in which a student encounters the doctoral research process. An absorbed reading of relevant literature and the problematisation of an approach to research, both of which are required of doctoral candidates, can become rabbit holes that encourage the pursuit of definition and hinder light from the world beyond. This does not excuse the problem. The potential of the publication, and the voice of the author, is insufficiently realised. The book presents insight into only part of the subject matter announced in its title.

Reviewer Biography

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