

Pedagogue Bonus: Environmental Humanities (w/Sid Dobrin)

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

Welcome to Pedagogue Bonus, a short episode that covers a single topic or question. I'm your host, Shane Wood.

This Pedagogue Bonus episode is in collaboration with The Big Rhetorical Podcast Carnival. The Big Rhetorical Podcast Carnival is comprised of a group of academic podcasters and rhetoricians and compositionists that are coming together around a singular theme. This year's theme is "Places and Spaces In and Beyond the Academy."

In this bonus episode, I talk with Sid Dobrin about environmental humanities.

Sid Dobrin is professor and chair of the Department of English at the University of Florida. His research focuses on three distinct but overlapping subjects, the ecological properties of writing, ecocriticism and ecomposition, including questions of oceanic criticism, and the relationship between writing and emerging technologies, including questions of contemporary digital and visual screen culture. Dobrin is also director of the Trace Innovation Initiative, a research hub that studies emerging writing technologies such as augmented reality and virtual reality applications, comic forms as scholarship, writing ecology, and other cool stuff. Dobrin has been named a Digital Thought Leader by Adobe, and he serves as chair of the American Sportfishing Association's Advocacy Committee.

Sid, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: You published a book in 2021 titled Blue Ecocriticism and the Oceanic Imperative, which covers conversations about blue ecocriticism, and this includes critical, ethical, cultural, and political positions. This book and your work, in general, as a teacher-scholar moves in and beyond academia. I wanted to provide space for you to talk about this book, ecomposition, ecocriticism, and specifically environmental humanities and your ongoing work outside the academy.

SD: Yeah, I mean, if we're talking about Blue Ecocriticism and we're talking about spaces outside of the academy or inside and outside of the academy, I have to back up by one book from the Blue Ecocriticism book. If you look at the work I've done over the years with ecomposition, with ecocriticism, with ecological rhetoric, two books ago I really been thinking a lot about how we deal with environmental humanities and ecomposition and how that has to be more than an internal conversation, how particularly those kinds of conservationist kind of positions have to be taken outside of the university. And so the book prior to the Blue Ecocriticism book that was published by Texas A&M University Press, is a book called Fishing, Gone?. And what I did in that book was I used my connection through the work that I do with the American Sportfishing Association and the advocacy work I do within the recreational fishing industry to write a book directed at a public audience that takes environmental humanities' methodologies to really create a critique of how federal policies interact with recreational fishing.

And I've been involved with the fishing industry forever. It's something that I plan on doing after I retire. I write for a lot of fishing magazines. But a lot of people don't recognize a couple of things, the first being that, depending on what numbers you look at, there are over 50 million registered recreational anglers in this country. It's close to a \$70 billion a year industry. It is among outdoor recreation part of a top 10 economic indicator for the United States. And so it's both big business, but it's also big politics. So I look a lot at fisheries policies, federal fisheries policies, through environmental humanities. It was really an opportunity for me to take the work I do outside the university and inside the university to write a book about how environmental humanities plays an impact there.

Then Blue Ecocriticism came up and I was really focused on how we write critique about oceanic concept, oceanic ... And how so much of our mindset is a terrestrial mindset that we have a difficult time really talking about ocean. So where that's led to is a new project that I'm working on now, and this is going to sound kind of wacky, but in the Blue Ecocriticism book started to become aware of some really interesting and powerful situations going on around the world that involve control of oceanic protein for human consumption. And so I started working on a book called Protein Economy., and through some advice of Jim Rickards, the economist, the bestselling author, economist, I've changed the project to be called Protein Wars.

And so what I'm looking at is how global fisheries practices and policies are having a effect and impact on global access to protein and both inside the United States but mostly globally, and the effect on social justice as well. So the example that I use when I'm giving talks about this is a lot of people don't recognize that in the United States, we eat a tremendous amount of shrimp. You can get shrimp anywhere. I've got some bits in the Blue Ecocriticism book. I got in touch with the town that is in the United States that is geographically the farthest away from ocean, it's a small town in South Dakota. They have two grocery stores. And I spoke with the grocery managers at one of the stores and their number one selling frozen seafood item is shrimp. But the shrimp industry is the largest purveyor of human trafficking and slavery in the world. And in the United States we don't think about that. We'll walk into a restaurant or to our grocery store or wherever and get frozen shrimp, and we're supporting human trafficking, we're supporting the slave trade. And we don't know that, we don't talk about that. And even when we do talk about it, because it's certainly been in big newspapers, the New York Times and things like that, still want my shrimp.

So a lot of what I've been thinking about with the role of environmental humanities and also digital humanities is that space outside the university. We talk about all this stuff internally. And for a long time the idea of public intellectualism was being used and most often attributed to a lot of the work being done in African American studies. And then more recently, public humanities has become much more of a sort of more broad spread concept of how are we doing humanistic critique that needs to be pushed out to the public. And so the work in the Blue Ecocriticism book was certainly academic work, but what it did was set the stage for me thinking about this next book project, which is called Protein Wars. And also, to be honest about it, that space has expanded for me a little bit because I've become involved here at the University of Florida with an initiative called the Florida Institute for National Security, which most of us hear "national security" and we immediately think military, and CIA, intelligence, and things like that. But national security now revolves also around climate change. It certainly revolves around nutrition,

security and protein security, which is where I get involved. And I've also been very vocal with that institute and also will tie into both the Protein Wars book and others too, the role of diversity in artificial intelligence as part of national security.

And so for me, what we do in the academy really ought to also be part of how we're talking to the rest of the world. It's our expertise that we need to be vocal about. And fortunately I happen to be at a place that provides both the opportunity and the support to do those things. And so right now my focus in my research is going to be on this environmental humanities, which will take up a digital humanities because I am using some AI research to drive some of the data projects that will involve this, but really how environmental humanities can inform how we're having conversations about policies that affect people's lives outside of the university.